

YOUNG WOMEN WORKERS STILL STRUGGLING A DECADE AFTER THE GREAT RECESSION: LESSONS FOR THE PANDEMIC RECOVERY

By Shengwei Sun, PhD

High shares of young women—seeking to “on-ramp” to fuller career pathways—worked part-time involuntarily and earned low wages a decade into the economic recovery from the Great Recession

Research Highlights

- The growth of low-wage, part-time jobs in the aftermath of the Great Recession restricted opportunities for entry-level workers and paved the way for the “she-cession” induced by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Job quality and availability remain of concern to young workers aged 16 to 24—a group transitioning from school to the workforce. In the decade after the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009, rates of involuntary part-time work remained elevated compared to unemployment levels and were the highest among young women not enrolled in school. Young women workers are concentrated in industries where low-quality jobs have increased significantly in recent years.
- Among young workers aged 21 to 25 and not enrolled in school, young Black women and men without a college education were especially likely to work part-time involuntarily. They would benefit from a nationally subsidized jobs program and policies for improving the quality of jobs available to young workers such as fair scheduling and wage parity for part-time workers.
- In 2019, the majority of young workers—68.5 percent of young women and 58.6 percent of young men—earned less than \$15/hour. This gendered disparity holds true across industries. Young women would benefit significantly from a higher federal minimum wage.



The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a “she-cession,” with women experiencing a disproportionate share of job losses (Institute for Women’s Policy Research 2021). Young women ages 16 to 24 years old suffered the largest percentage decline in employment compared to young men and prime-age workers, mainly due to their concentration in service sectors and occupations that had been hit the hardest by the pandemic recession (Sun 2021). The outsized effects of the COVID-19 pandemic recession on young women reflect pre-existing inequalities in the labor market. Achieving an equitable economic recovery requires understanding how the U.S. labor market has been transformed in the past decade and beyond—to the detriment of workers.

Labor market recovery from the Great Recession (2007–2009) was slow and prolonged. Job expansion during the recovery period was driven by the growth of low-wage jobs and an increase in involuntary part-time employment (Dwyer and Wright 2019; Valletta, Bengali, and van der List 2018). Real (inflation-adjusted) wages have been stagnant for working- and middle-class workers, with economic inequalities continuing to grow (Donovan and Bradley 2020). In this context, historically low unemployment rates, ten years after the Great Recession ended, masks the extent of labor market difficulties for many workers.



Young entry-level workers are more vulnerable to adverse labor market conditions due to their relative lack of work-relevant skills, experience, and resources. How, then, have young workers fared in the recovery from the Great Recession? Are certain groups of young workers more vulnerable to the burdens of a sluggish recovery? And what lessons can we learn to ensure a robust and equitable recovery from the COVID-19 recession? This briefing paper draws on Current Population Survey (CPS) data to examine several key labor market trends for young women relative to young men and older workers in the years following the Great Recession. The brief also examines disparities in involuntary part-time rates by race/ethnicity and education level among young workers.

Findings from this paper suggest that an inadequate recovery from the Great Recession—as characterized by the growth of low-wage, part-time jobs—restricted opportunities of quality jobs for entry-level workers and paved the way for the “she-cession” induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Heavy concentration in service and retail industries where job quality has been on the decline undermined young women’s economic security and rendered them vulnerable to job losses induced by the pandemic. Young Black women without a college education have been especially disadvantaged.

Early experiences in the workforce play a significant role in shaping earnings and career trajectories, with lasting consequences over a worker's life. Young workers struggling to establish themselves in the labor market would benefit from a more robust recovery. This brief will conclude with the policy responses needed to create a stronger ecosystem that enables young workers to thrive.

Recovery from the Great Recession Did Not Generate Enough Quality Jobs

In 2019, a decade after beginning to recover from the Great Recession, the U.S. labor market appeared strong according to commonly cited indicators. Job growth was on its longest streak on record, and the unemployment rate fell to 3.5 percent, the lowest level since 1969 (Edwards and Smith 2020). Just a few months later, as the COVID-19 pandemic plunged the U.S. economy into another recession, tens of millions of Americans found themselves and their families struggling to secure basic necessities such as food and housing. The pandemic recession has since exposed American workers' economic fragility, forcing a reckoning with the sluggish economic recovery in the last decade.

Unemployment rates alone do not capture the depth of labor market difficulties for many workers. What also matters is the quality of available jobs. A "good" job not only comes with economic benefits—including a living wage and nonwage benefits such as health insurance—it also allows workers control over their work schedules and autonomy over the content of work (Kalleberg 2011). Key dynamics of the post-Great Recession economy associated with rising employment in the service sectors have chipped away the availability of high-quality jobs.

The labor market recovery since the Great Recession was driven by the growth of low-wage jobs and an increase in part-time employment. Primarily driven by dynamics in the service sectors, low-wage jobs increased more than middle-wage jobs during this period,

DEFINITIONS OF PART-TIME WORKERS

Part-time workers: Those who normally work for less than 35 hours per week.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) identifies two groups of part-time workers:

- **Voluntary part-time workers:** Individuals who work "part-time for non-economic reasons," such as illness or health limitations, family or personal obligations, in school or training, or partial retirement.
- **Involuntary part-time workers:** Individuals who want and are available to work full-time but work "part-time for economic reasons," including slack work, seasonal work, unfavorable business conditions, and inability to find full-time work.

Notes: Following Golden (2016), this brief uses basic monthly CPS microdata to identify voluntary and involuntary part-time workers based on their reported actual hours worked in the reference week. Because only those who reported "at work" in the reference week were identified as working part-time voluntarily or involuntarily, analysis from this brief excludes workers who were absent from work despite having a job in the reference week. This group of workers represent less than 4 percent of all employed workers in the CPS within the time range of this study. Excluding them likely leads to an undercount of part-time workers, although the extent of such undercount is unknowable. See Golden (2016) for more details on defining voluntary and involuntary part-time workers using CPS data.

The BLS's definition of involuntary part-time workers—"part-time for economic reasons"—is a widely used measure of underemployment in the U.S. However, this single measure underestimates the breadth and severity of underemployment. When using a broader measure that includes any part-time worker who prefers more work hours, not just those who want full-time jobs, Golden and Kim (2020) found about one in every ten workers in the U.S. were underemployed part-time workers in 2016, double the rate of the narrower BLS measure. Golden and Kim (2020) drew on data from the 2016 U.S. General Social Survey (GSS) and its International Social Survey Program's Work Orientations module. However, the Work Orientations module is only available in limited years, and the sample size of the GSS is too small to render reliable estimates broken down by gender, age group, race/ethnicity, and level of education. Due to these data limitations, this policy brief uses CPS data and focuses on comparing rates of involuntary part-time work across demographic groups and over time while acknowledging that the BLS measure underestimates the extent of underemployment.

particularly for women workers and workers of color (Dwyer and Wright 2019).¹ At the same time, the value of the federal minimum wage has eroded: After adjusting for inflation, in 2016 the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 was worth 10 percent less than when it was last raised in 2009 and 25 percent lower than its peak value in 1968 (Cooper 2016).

The Great Recession also saw an upsurge in employers' use of part-time workers, a trend that continued in the following years. Today many workers are working part-time involuntarily—they want and are available to work full-time but cannot find full-time employment (Golden 2016). As with the growth of low-wage jobs, rising employment in the service sector and the "gig economy" made especially large contributions to the shift toward involuntary part-time employment (Valletta, Bengali, and van der List 2018).

The rise of part-time (especially involuntary part-time) work undermines workers' economic security and well-being. Part-time workers on average are paid about 30 percent less per hour than full-time workers with similar demographic and educational backgrounds; this part-time wage penalty is worse for workers who work part-time but want to work full-time (Golden 2020). Part-time jobs also tend to provide few benefits, low job security, more varied and unpredictable work schedules, and limited advancement opportunities (Kalleberg 2011). Work schedule instability is especially detrimental to workers' health and well-being (Schneider and Harknett 2019). High rates of involuntary part-time employment—suggesting high levels of underemployment—also undermine workers' bargaining power in the labor market and suppress wage growth in the long run (Bell and Blanchflower 2021).

Unemployment Rates Highest Among Young Men; Involuntary Part-Time Rates Highest Among Young Women Not Enrolled In School



How have young workers fared in the economic recovery from the Great Recession? Figure 1 presents the changing unemployment rates throughout the Great Recession and its aftermath, broken down by gender and age group (young workers aged 16 to 24 and prime-age workers aged 25 to 64). The unemployment rate refers to the number of unemployed people as a percentage of the labor force (employed and unemployed).² Figure 2 presents the changing proportions of workers not enrolled in school—among each gender by age groups—who work part-time voluntarily and involuntarily. Because young people are more likely to hold part-time jobs partly because many are still completing their education, the calculation of part-time work rates excludes

those currently enrolled in school and focuses on those who are theoretically available for full-time work.³ Both Figures 1 and 2 present three-year averages using pooled basic monthly CPS data for each three-year period between 2005 and 2019. As the Great Recession began in December 2007, the 2005 to 2007 period represents pre-recession conditions and serves as the benchmark for comparing the rates from ensuing years.

¹ Dwyer and Wright (2019) rank jobs from the lowest to the highest median hourly wage and define low-wage jobs as those in the bottom tercile (about one-third of all jobs). From 2009 to 2017, the median wage in the bottom tercile was \$12.8 per hour (in 2017 dollars), which for a full-time, full-year worker yielded an annual income at the U.S. poverty line for a family of four.

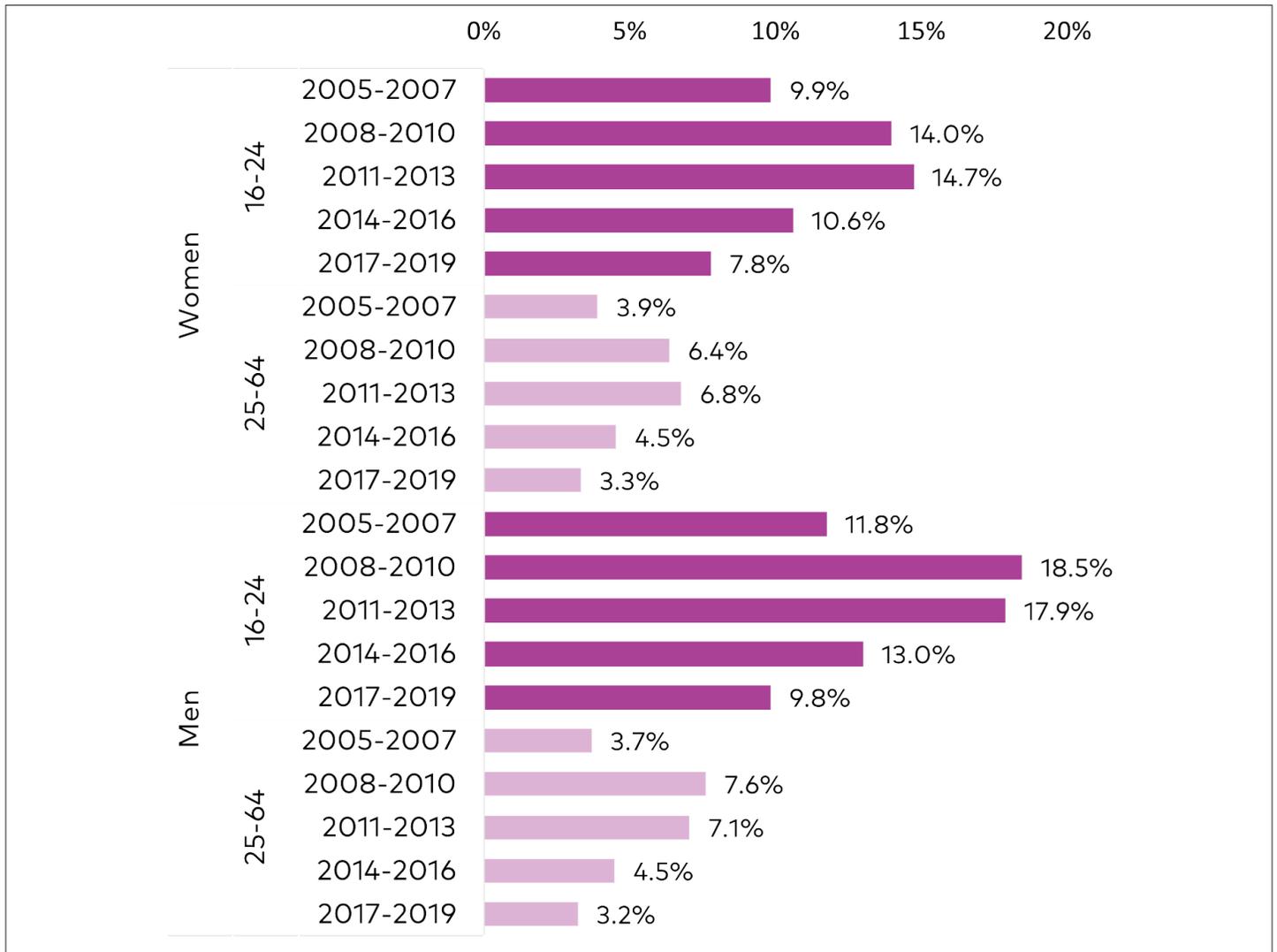
² See concepts and definitions used for Current Population Survey (<https://www.bls.gov/cps/definitions.htm#ur>).

³ In results not shown, rates of involuntary part-time work are substantially lower among young workers enrolled in school than among those not enrolled in school. Including those enrolled in school in the analytic sample drives down the overall rates of involuntary part-time work among this age group.

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, both unemployment and involuntary part-time rates rose substantially across gender and age groups. Workers aged 16 to 24 historically have had higher unemployment rates than prime-age workers and were hit especially hard by the Great Recession. Within each age group, unemployment rates have been higher for men than women, with young men experiencing the highest unemployment rates throughout this period (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Unemployment Rates Higher for Young Workers, Especially Young Men

Unemployment rates by age group and gender, 2005 to 2019



Notes: Results are weighted and not seasonally adjusted. Three-year averages of pooled data are calculated for each period. The unemployment rate is defined as the number of unemployed people as a percentage of the labor force which includes both employed and unemployed people.

Source: IWPR analysis of the basic monthly Current Population Survey microdata (IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org).

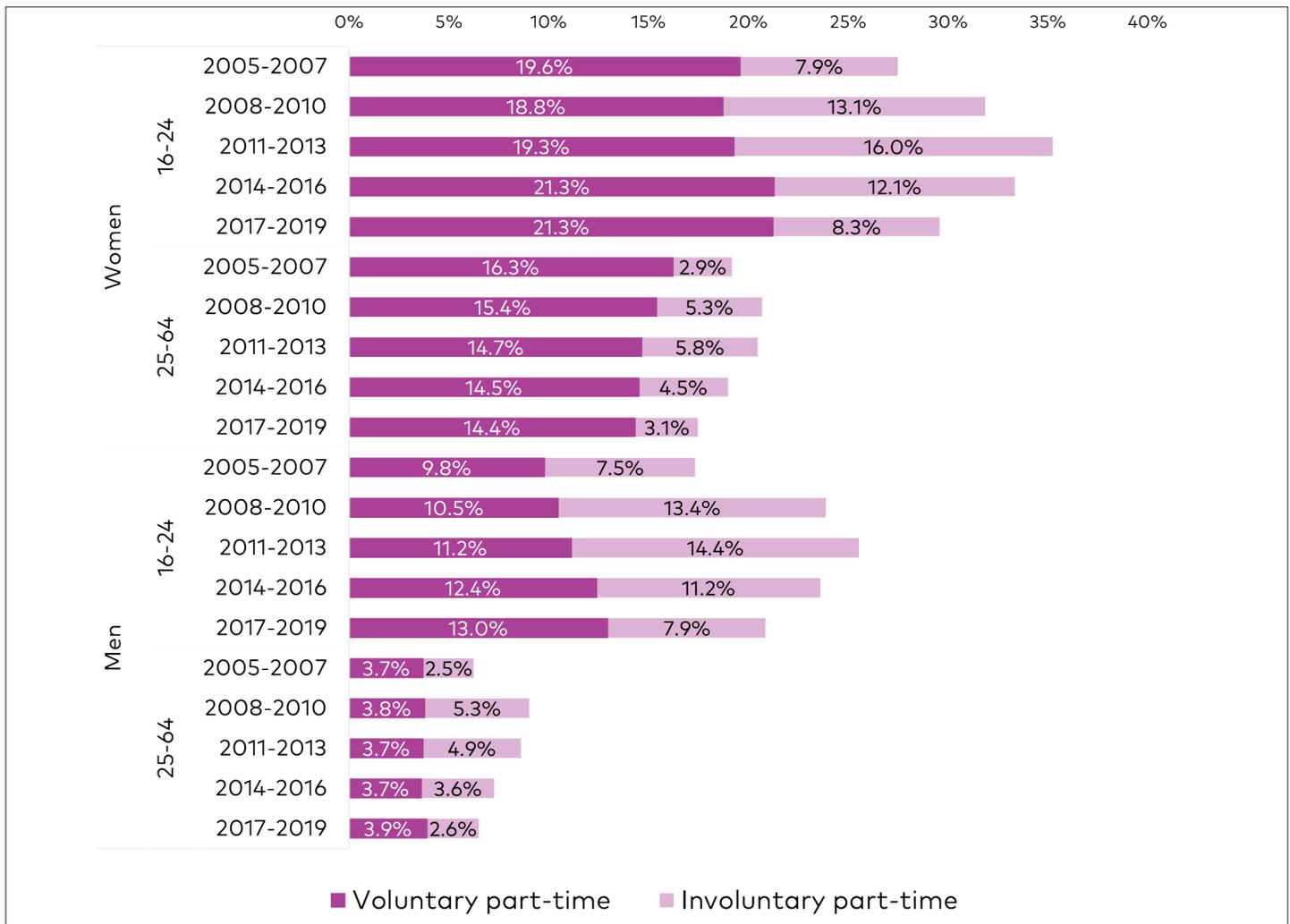
Ten years into the recovery period, unemployment rates were lower than they had been before the Great Recession among young and prime-age workers of both genders (Figure 1). By contrast, involuntary part-time rates among those not enrolled in school declined more slowly (Figure 2). Involuntary part-time employment overall returned to pre-Great Recession levels in 2019 but remained elevated relative to historically low unemployment (Kudlyak 2019). Researchers cautioned that the structure of the labor market had fundamentally changed in recent years, with unemployment being replaced by part-time work, much of which was

unwanted (Valletta, Bengali, and van der List 2018). Younger workers were particularly hard-hit by this phenomenon.

As shown in Figure 2, throughout the recovery period, younger workers not enrolled in school were more than twice as likely as prime-age workers to be employed part-time involuntarily. Among those not enrolled in school, involuntary part-time rates remained the highest among young women workers, reaching 16.0 percent at the peak (2011–2013), compared with 14.4 percent for young working men, 5.8 percent for prime-age working women, and 5.3 percent for prime-age working men (2008–2010). Young working women also had the highest voluntary part-time rates (around 20.0 percent throughout the recovery period). Adding these two types of part-time employment together, over a third (35.3 percent) of young working women not enrolled in school were part-time workers between 2011 and 2013. Although the share of young women working part-time declined to 29.6 percent in 2017–2019, this rate still exceeded the pre–Great Recession level (27.5 percent).

FIGURE 2. Involuntary Part-Time Rates Higher for Young Workers Not Enrolled in School, Especially Young Women

Percentage of employed populations (not enrolled in school) in voluntary and involuntary part-time work, by age group and gender, 2005 to 2019



Notes: Results are weighted and not seasonally adjusted. The sample for this part of the analysis excludes those enrolled in school. Three-year averages of pooled data are calculated for each period.

Source: IWPR analysis of the basic monthly Current Population Survey microdata (IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org).

With a higher share of part-time work (voluntary and involuntary combined), young women have carried the weight of declining job security in general. Research reveals that younger women under the age of 26 are more likely than young men and prime-age workers to be contingent workers who do not expect their jobs to last or who report their jobs to be temporary (Medlin and Rho 2019). Between 2005 and 2017, the shares of young women aged 21 to 25 in contingent jobs increased while the shares of young men and older workers declined (Medlin and Rho 2019).

The prevalence of part-time employment among young women is largely due to their concentration in specific industries. The increase in involuntary part-time positions since the Great Recession is particularly pronounced in industries where part-time jobs were already more common, including leisure and hospitality, retail trade, educational and health services, and professional and business services (Golden 2016). Young women are more likely than young men and prime-age workers to be employed in these industries (Sun 2021).

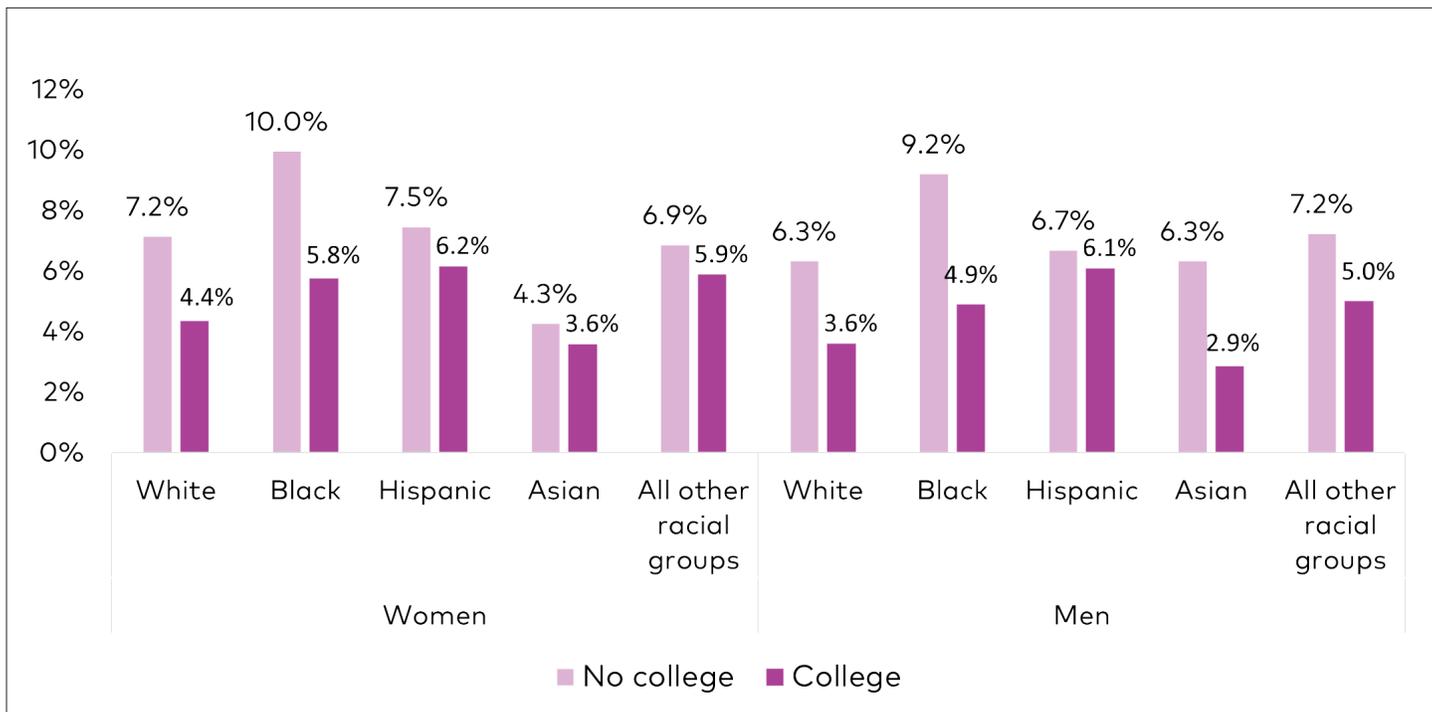
Young Black Women and Men Without a College Degree Especially Likely to Work Part-Time Involuntarily

Are certain groups of young workers more vulnerable to the burdens of a sluggish recovery? To further examine disparities in working part-time involuntarily among young workers, Figure 3 breaks down the rates of involuntary part-time work by major race/ethnicity groups and whether one has a bachelor's degree, separately for young women and men. This part of the analysis focuses on the 2017 to 2019 period and an older subgroup of young women (aged 21 to 25) not enrolled in school who are likely in their career-launching stage. Analyses focusing on young women aged 16 to 24 or an alternative time range during the recovery period yield similar results.

In 2017 to 2019, except for Asian workers, young workers of color were more likely to work part-time involuntarily than young White workers. Across gender and race/ethnic groups, college-educated workers were less likely to work part-time involuntarily than those without a college education. Young Black women and men without a college degree were especially likely to work part-time involuntarily (10.0 percent and 9.2 percent, respectively). By contrast, the groups least likely to work part-time involuntarily among young workers were college-educated young Asian and White workers (all below 5 percent).

FIGURE 3. One of Ten Young Black Women Without a College Degree Worked Part-Time Involuntarily, the Highest Rate Among Young Workers Not Enrolled in School

Percentage of young workers ages 21 to 25 (not enrolled in school) in involuntary part-time work, by race/ethnicity, level of education, and gender, 2017–2019



Notes: Results are weighted. The sample for this part of the analysis excludes those enrolled in school. Included in “All other racial groups” are Pacific Islander, American Indian and Alaska Native, Multiracial, and other races not shown separately. Three-year averages of pooled 2017, 2018, and 2019 data are presented.

Source: IWPR analysis of the basic monthly Current Population Survey microdata (IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org).

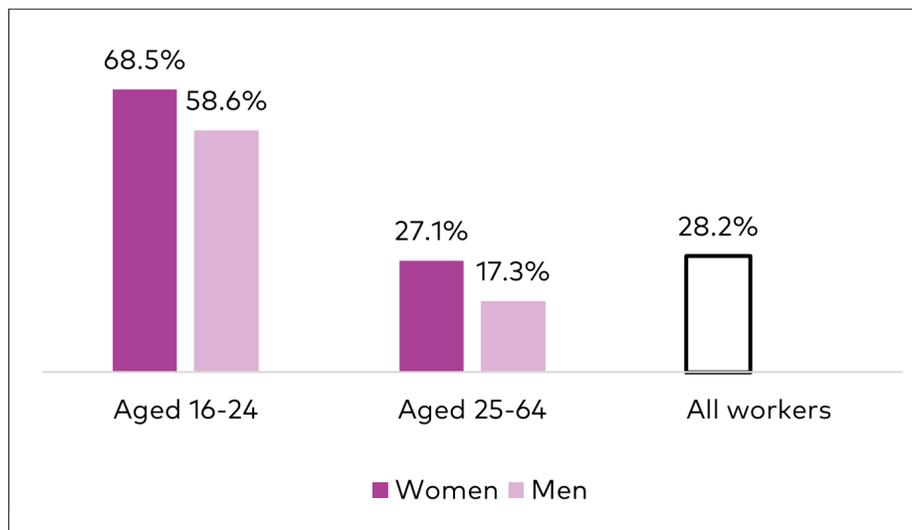
Two of Three Young Women Earned Less than \$15 per Hour in 2019

The slow decline in involuntary part-time employment in the aftermath of the Great Recession means that many workers have been stuck in part-time employment that offer inadequate hours for workers to get by. The lack of access to jobs paying a living wage among low-wage workers makes the issue of minimum wage all the more salient. Since the Fight for \$15 movement got off the ground in 2012, several states and cities have raised the minimum wage to \$15 an hour at the state and local level with some exceptions, benefiting an estimated 22 million low-wage workers (National Employment Law Project 2018). In early 2021, legislators introduced the Raise the Wage Act of 2021 to gradually increase the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 an hour to \$15 an hour by 2025. Raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 by 2025 is estimated to lift up to 3.7 million workers and their children out of poverty (Cooper, Mokhiber, and Zipperer 2021).

Figure 4 provides a snapshot of the shares of workers earning under \$15 an hour among all workers and by gender and age group in 2019. Nearly one-third (28.2 percent) of all workers in the U.S. made less than \$15 an hour. The majority of young workers were low-wage workers, including 68.5 percent of young working women and 58.6 percent of young working men; among prime-age workers, 27.1 percent of women and 17.3 percent of men earned under \$15 per hour. Low-wage work is more common among women than among men in both age groups and is especially prevalent among young women.

FIGURE 4. Two of Three Young Women Made Less than \$15/Hour in 2019

Percentage of workers earning less than \$15/hour, by age group, 2019



Notes: Results are weighted. The analytic sample is restricted to the civilian population ages 16 and above with a positive Outgoing Rotation Groups sample weight. Hourly wage values are excluded from the analysis if they are under \$1 per hour or above \$199.63 per hour in 2019 dollars. The hourly wage includes payments for overtime, tips, and commissions for workers paid hourly or nonhourly. For nonhourly workers, hourly earnings are calculated as their weekly earnings divided by usual weekly hours worked at the primary job. Usual weekly hours were imputed for those who report that their usual weekly hours vary at work. For more details on the construction of hourly wage variables, see <https://microdata.epi.org/methodology/wagevariables/>.

Source: IWPR analysis of the Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group microdata (Economic Policy Institute, Current Population Survey Extracts, Version 1.0.14, <https://microdata.epi.org>).

The following analysis further examines the shares of young women and men, respectively, in low-wage employment in industries where they are concentrated. As Table 1 shows, in 2019 more than 70 percent of young women aged 16 to 24 worked in just three industries: Leisure and hospitality (28.2 percent), Educational and health services (25.7 percent), and Retail (18.2 percent). An overwhelming majority of young women working in these three industries earned less than \$15 per hour: 80.7 percent of young women in Leisure and hospitality, 60.2 percent in Educational and health services, and 82.2 percent in Retail.

For young men, over 40 percent were employed in two industries (23.1 percent in Leisure and hospitality and 19.2 percent in Retail), where the vast majority earned an hourly wage of less than \$15 (78.1 percent of young men in Leisure and hospitality and 74.6 percent in Retail). Another nearly 30 percent of young men worked in Construction (9.9 percent), Manufacturing (9.5 percent), and Professional and business services (9.3 percent). About two of every five young men employed in these industries earned less than \$15 an hour.

Table 1 demonstrates not only that young women were more concentrated in low-wage industries compared with young men, but that, even in the same industries, a higher share of young women than young men earned less than \$15 an hour (e.g., 82.2 percent of young women compared to 74.6 percent of young men in Retail).⁴ These results suggest that industry concentration cannot fully explain the gender disparity.

⁴ In results not shown, a higher share of young women than young men earned less than \$15 an hour in all major industry groups defined by the Census Bureau (see <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cenind2012.pdf>).

TABLE 1. Higher Share of Young Women than Young Men Earned Less than \$15/Hour Even in the Same Industry

Percentage of young women and men in the top five industries where they concentrate earning under \$15/hour, 2019

Top 5 industries where young women concentrate	% of young women employed in this industry	% of young women in this industry earning < \$15/hr	Top 5 industries where young men concentrate	% of young men employed in this industry	% of young men in this industry earning < \$15/hr
Leisure and hospitality	28.2%	80.7%	Leisure and hospitality	23.1%	78.1%
Educational and health services	25.7%	60.2%	Retail	19.2%	74.6%
Retail	18.2%	82.2%	Construction	9.9%	36.5%
Professional and business services	7.1%	48.5%	Manufacturing	9.5%	40.6%
Other services	5.6%	74.0%	Professional and business services	9.3%	39.4%

Notes: Results are weighted. The analytic sample is restricted to the civilian population ages 16 and above with a positive Outgoing Rotation Groups sample weight. Hourly wage values are excluded from the analysis if they are under \$1 per hour or above \$199.63 per hour in 2019 dollars. The hourly wage includes payments for overtime, tips, and commissions for workers paid hourly or nonhourly. For nonhourly workers, hourly earnings are calculated as their weekly earnings divided by usual weekly hours worked at the primary job. Usual weekly hours were imputed for those who report that their usual weekly hours vary at work. For more details on the construction of hourly wage variables, see <https://microdata.epi.org/methodology/wagevariables/>.

Source: IWPR analysis of the Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group microdata (Economic Policy Institute, Current Population Survey Extracts, Version 1.0.14, <https://microdata.epi.org>).

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Ten years into the recovery from the 2007 to 2009 Great Recession, unemployment rates had fallen to pre-recession levels while rates of involuntary part-time work declined more slowly, pointing to the ongoing challenges young people face with regard to low-quality jobs. The jobs available to young workers are often low-wage, insecure, and dead-end. While many young people are entry-level workers seeking to transition to a fuller career and will eventually move out of low-wage jobs, the systemic downgrading of job quality means that young people today will, on average, take longer to move up the economic ladder. The growth of low-wage, low-quality work had made it difficult for young people to gain a foothold in the labor market, affecting their long-term economic outlook and transition to adulthood.

The burden of an inadequate economic recovery was not shared equally. This policy brief finds that young women not enrolled in school, especially young women of color and those with lower levels of education, were at a higher risk of working part-time involuntarily than other groups of workers. Further, the vast majority of young women workers made less than \$15 an hour in 2019.

The sustained high rates of low-wage and part-time employment among young women may be partly attributed to their heavy concentration in retail and service industries that are key contributors to the growth of low-quality jobs over the past few decades, a trend accelerated by

the Great Recession. Fast-forwarding to 2020, it is precisely these job sectors that experienced the most significant job losses. Young women's concentration in these sectors rendered them especially vulnerable to job losses in the pandemic-induced recession. Still, findings from this brief suggest that industry concentration cannot fully explain the gender disparity in the share of workers in low-wage employment.

Young women are among the most marginalized in the economy, and they have been hit especially hard during the COVID-19 recession. High shares of early-career young women working part-time involuntarily in low-wage jobs not only impact their individual career trajectories and economic security down the road, it also has long-term implications for gender inequality. If the recovery from the pandemic recession follows the path of the previous recovery, generating mainly low-wage, low-quality jobs, it will undermine the future of another generation of workers.

The "low-road" recovery path following the Great Recession took place against the backdrop of a long-term decline in job quality, unionization rates, and workers' power in the United States. To create a strong foundation for young workers to thrive in the years to come, recovery efforts should not only address unemployment but also focus on enhancing job quality, strengthening collective bargaining, and expanding equitable outcomes.

Policy recommendations to catalyze these recovery efforts include:

Improve the quality of part-time jobs. Enact legislation to provide workers who work fewer than 35 hours per week with the same access to equal pay, benefits, and promotion opportunities as full-time workers; greater stability, predictability, and flexibility in their work schedules; minimum hours; and rights to request additional hours, scheduling changes, and accommodations without fear of retaliation (Golden and Kim 2020). Require large employers to offer newly available work hours to existing part-time workers before hiring new staff members, temp workers, or subcontractors.

Promote the creation of and equal access to high-quality jobs. Expand equity-centered public job programs targeting young people, especially those with disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Schnur, Warland, and Young 2021). Public job programs would not only help reduce unemployment but could also play an important role in setting labor standards. Address long-standing inequities rooted in systemic racism and gender discrimination that prevent young women and young workers of color from accessing decent-paying jobs in the building trades and the "green economy" (Childers, Hegewisch, and Shaw 2021). Raise the labor standards in the expanding paid-care sector to ensure that care work jobs are high-quality jobs.

Expand affordable job training opportunities other than higher education that would lead to middle-skill jobs. Well-designed job training programs such as a guaranteed job training benefit through debt-free community college can complement demand-side economic interventions in addressing unemployment and meeting the growing demand for middle-skill workers with post-high school training and less than a bachelor's degree (Mishory 2019). Creating equitable pathways to job training programs can play a critical role in facilitating women and people of color with accessing well-paying, middle-skill jobs in traditionally male-dominated sectors, including those categorized as part of the "green economy."

Expand access to paid leave and affordable child care. Access to paid leave on the job and affordable, reliable child care allows young workers with care responsibilities—such as young parents, the majority of whom are single mothers (Sick, Spaulding, and Park 2018)—to balance work and family needs. This is especially important for addressing gender disparity in job sectors that have long excluded women. Access to affordable, high-quality child care services is also essential for young adults with care responsibilities to complete education and job training programs and improve their labor market prospects. In summary, eliminating gender inequality in access to education, job training, and high-quality jobs depends on ensuring universal access to high-quality care with public investment in the care infrastructure. Such investments must include living wages and fair labor standards for the care workforce.

Tackle workplace discrimination. Enact the Paycheck Fairness Act—recently passed by the House of Representatives—to expand coverage and strengthen the provisions of the Equal Pay Act. Enhance the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s enforcement of laws banning discrimination in hiring, promotion, and pay of women and people of color. Expand and improve enforcement of pay transparency laws to protect workers from retaliation for sharing wage and salary information with coworkers. Limit employers’ reliance on salary history in recruitment and pay decisions and require employers to provide job applicants with salary ranges for advertised positions. Improve the collection of pay data by gender and race/ethnicity from midsize and large employers, and augment employers’ analysis of internal pay policies.

Increase the minimum wage. Raise the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour from \$7.25, indexed to the median wage, and eliminate the subminimum wage for tipped workers, which has been frozen at \$2.13 per hour at the federal level for thirty years. A \$15 minimum wage in 2025 would boost pay to 11 million young workers aged 16 to 24 (Cooper, Mokhiber, and Zipperer 2021). Raising the wage floor would have an outsized benefit for young women, given their heavy concentration in low-wage service jobs.

Strengthen collective bargaining. Pass the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act to close loopholes in U.S. labor laws and impose meaningful punishments on employers for violating workers’ rights to organize and bargain collectively.

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