

AN IMPOSSIBLE JUGGLING ACT: YOUNG PARENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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During the pandemic, young parents—especially young single mothers—experienced a sharp decline in employment and prolonged economic hardship for their families.

Research Highlights

- Young parents aged 18 to 29 are a socioeconomically diverse group, including a disproportionate share of single mothers with young children.
- During the pandemic, young parents overall experienced a significant decline in employment and labor force participation, followed by an uneven recovery. Among all parents aged 18 to 54, young mothers suffered the largest decline in employment and labor force participation between February and April 2020. Young fathers' employment rates also fell significantly and remained low throughout the summer of 2020.
- Among young parents, single mothers—more than half of whom are Black and Latina mothers—experienced the sharpest decline in employment in the initial months of the pandemic.
- The slow and difficult recovery patterns for young parents may be attributed to the job sectors that young parents concentrate in and increased responsibilities for taking care of children during lockdown periods.
- The pandemic disrupted both employment and education for young parents. Compared to married and cohabiting parents, single parents experienced the sharpest increase in being out of work and out of school during the pandemic.
- Young mothers worry about economic insecurity long after the height of the pandemic-induced recession. Young single mothers worry the most: 65.0 percent reported that they frequently worry about paying their bills, and three out of four (75.1 percent) employed single mothers said they often worry about taking a cut in pay.



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic upended life for countless families and brought heightened attention to the plight of working parents. Mothers with young and school-aged children have borne the brunt of the care crisis in the United States, as schools and daycare centers across the country closed. Compared to fathers, mothers have been more likely to exit the labor force prematurely, become unemployed, and reduce their work hours during the pandemic (Heggeness 2020; Landivar et al. 2020).

Young parents face acute challenges in balancing work, education, and family care responsibilities. With young workers concentrated in low-wage, service-sector jobs, which lack benefits like paid leave and flexible schedules, balancing work and care obligations becomes an impossible juggling act (Ben-Ishai et al. 2016). Young adults are also generally more vulnerable to unemployment, especially during economic downturns. In addition, a substantial number of young parents are enrolled in school: Over one in four college students are parents, and 15 percent of all college students are single parents (CLASP 2015). Not only has the pandemic taken a toll on young parents without financial cushions, but the disruption in education and early career opportunities may limit their economic prospects for years to come.

Most young parents have young children aged three and under. With economic inequality on the rise and a dearth of social supports, more and more American children are growing up in homes with stark differences in access to resources, leading to “diverging destinies” that put them on different developmental trajectories (McLanahan 2004). Research shows that achievement gaps between children in low-income households and those in higher-income households emerge in the earliest years of life, and these disparities persist and even widen as children grow older (see García and Weiss 2015). Households led by single mothers are especially vulnerable to economic insecurity and it is likely that the pandemic will exacerbate preexisting inequalities.

With a focus on young parents aged 18 to 29 living with their own children, this brief aims to capture how young parents have fared during the COVID-19 pandemic and how their experiences vary by gender and marital or cohabitation status (i.e., married, cohabiting, or solo/single).¹ Drawing on data from the basic monthly Current Population Survey, it examines the shifting levels of employment and labor force participation held by young parents during the pandemic. In addition, data from a public opinion survey conducted by the Institute of Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) in June 2021 provides a snapshot of the economic situation of young mothers, especially single mothers, more than one year after the height of the pandemic-induced recession. The brief concludes with policy recommendations about how to better support all young parent families.

¹ In this brief, “parents” are defined as those living with at least one of their own children under the age of 18, including stepchildren, adopted children, and biological children. The Current Population Survey does not explicitly ask about custody arrangements but counts any parent whose child resides with them most of the time as “living with” that child. “Young parents” in this brief include all parents aged 18 to 29. Additional analyses using an alternative age range (18 to 24) yield similar results. “Solo parents” and “single parents” are used interchangeably in this brief, referring to parents who are not living with a spouse or partner.

Without a strong social safety net, young parent families will face prolonged economic insecurity, even as the country slowly recovers. They urgently need systemic change across a mosaic of social supports, including access to universal child care and paid leave, affordable health care and housing, higher wages, predictable schedules, and workplace protections. Given that many young parent households have children under three years of age, investing in young parent families would yield long-term benefits to uplift future generations.

YOUNG PARENTS ARE SOCIOECONOMICALLY DIVERSE, WITH A LARGE SHARE OF SINGLE MOTHERS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Young parents are a diverse group, reflecting socioeconomic disparities in the family formation process. Recent decades saw rising income and wealth inequalities fueled by large-scale macroeconomic forces such as globalization, declining middle-class jobs and unionization, higher risks and stagnant pay for workers, and the transition to a service-based economy (Kalleberg 2011). Economic disparities have grown in tandem with diverging family formation processes that create gaps between those with access to resources and those without. People with college degrees and higher incomes—who have a greater chance of achieving economic stability—are more likely to get married, have children, and stay married, while women with fewer resources and less education are more likely to raise children as single mothers (McLanahan 2004). This section provides an overview of the diversity among young parents by marital/cohabitation status, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment using pooled basic monthly data from the Current Population Survey.

In 2020, 15 percent of all young adults aged 18 to 29 were young parents currently living with their own children (Figure 1). Of young parents, 70.8 percent have children aged three and under, compared with 27.2 percent of older parents aged 30 to 54. The average age of the youngest child of young parents is 2.8 years old.²

In terms of marital/cohabitation status, slightly over one-half (53.8 percent) of young parents are married, 20.4 percent are cohabiting, and about one-quarter (25.8 percent) are single parents without a spouse or partner present in the household (Figure 1). Two out of three (67.6 percent) young parents are young mothers. Women represent an even higher proportion of single parents: an overwhelming majority (89.7 percent) of young single parents are single mothers. Nearly one-quarter (23.1 percent) of all young parents are single mothers.³ These numbers suggest that a substantial portion of young parents are single mothers with young children.

² IWPR's calculation of the basic monthly Current Population Survey data (2020).

³ IWPR's calculation of the basic monthly Current Population Survey data (2020).

FIGURE 1. Selected Characteristics of Young Parents aged 18 to 29, 2020

Young parents living with their own children represent 15.0 percent of all young adults aged 18-28.



Among young parents living with their own children:

More than 79% are living with their own children aged 0-3.



Nearly 70 percent are women.



About half are married.



Nearly 90 percent of young solo parents are solo mothers.



Notes: Results are weighted. "Parents" refer to those individuals living with one of their own children, including stepchildren, adopted children, and biological children. Any parent whose child lives with them most of the time is counted as "living with" that child. "Solo parents" (or "single parents") refers to parents who are not living with a spouse or partner, including the small share of parents who are married but not living with a spouse or partner. "Cohabiting parents" are parents who are living with a partner to whom they are not married. "Married parents" are married and living with a spouse.

Source: IWPR analysis of the basic monthly Current Population Survey microdata (January to December 2020 pooled); IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

The diversity in family structure reflects socioeconomic disparities among young adults: Young single parents disproportionately come from Black and Latinx families who face structural barriers in accessing higher education, quality jobs, and wealth. As Table 1 shows, young Black and Latinx adults are overrepresented among young parents (16.2 percent and 27.9 percent, respectively) when compared to their share of the overall young adult population (13.9 percent and 22.6 percent, respectively). Young Black adults are substantially overrepresented (32.9 percent) among young single parents and under-represented (8.4 percent) among young married parents. The pattern is reversed for young White adults, who represent 56.4 percent of young married parents and 31.0 percent of young single parents, compared with 53.2 percent of all young adults.

Over one-third of married parents have at least some college education (13.2 percent with an associate's degree and 22.6 percent with a bachelor's degree or above), a level substantially higher than their unmarried counterparts. The majority of young cohabiting parents (82.7 percent) and young single parents (82.7 percent) have a high school education or less.

TABLE 1. Race/Ethnicity and Educational Attainment of Young Adults and Young Parents, 2020

	All young adults	All young parents	Married young parents	Cohabiting young parents	Solo young parents
Race/ethnicity					
White	53.2	48.4	56.4	49.0	31.0
Black	13.9	16.2	8.4	15.7	32.9
Latinx	22.6	27.9	27.2	26.6	30.2
All other racial groups	10.3	7.5	7.9	8.6	5.9
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Educational attainment					
Less than high school	9.5	11.3	10.3	13.1	12.0
High school or equivalent	57.4	61.4	53.9	69.6	70.7
Associate's degree	8.0	11.3	13.2	8.5	9.6
Bachelor's degree or above	25.1	16.0	22.6	8.9	7.7
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Notes: Results are weighted. "Parents" refer to those living with one of their own children, including stepchildren, adopted children, and biological children. Any parent whose child lives with them most of the time is counted as "living with" that child. "Solo parents" (or "single parents") refers to parents who are not living with a spouse or partner, including the small share of parents who are married but not living with a spouse or partner; the vast majority of single parents are not married. "Cohabiting parents" are parents who are living with a partner to whom they are not married. "Married parents" are married and living with a spouse. Included in "All other racial groups" are Pacific Islander, American Indian and Alaska Native, multiracial, and other races not shown separately.

Source: IWPR analysis of the basic monthly Current Population Survey microdata (January to December 2020 pooled); IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Finally, young parent families were economically vulnerable even before the pandemic. Younger people today have lower real incomes and fewer assets than members of earlier generations when they were at similar ages (Kurz, Li, and Vine 2018). From 2015 to 2017, the median family income for families led by young parents aged between 18 and 24 was \$23,000, slightly above the federal poverty level for a family of three (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2018). In 2016, the net worth of the family of a typical 24-year-old was about \$5,072, compared with \$25,989 for the family of a typical 30-year-old, and \$130,454 for the family of a typical 48-year-old (Emmons, Kent, and Ricketts 2018).⁴ Therefore, a large share of young parents, especially low-income single parents, went into the pandemic without the financial supports to cope with economic fallout.

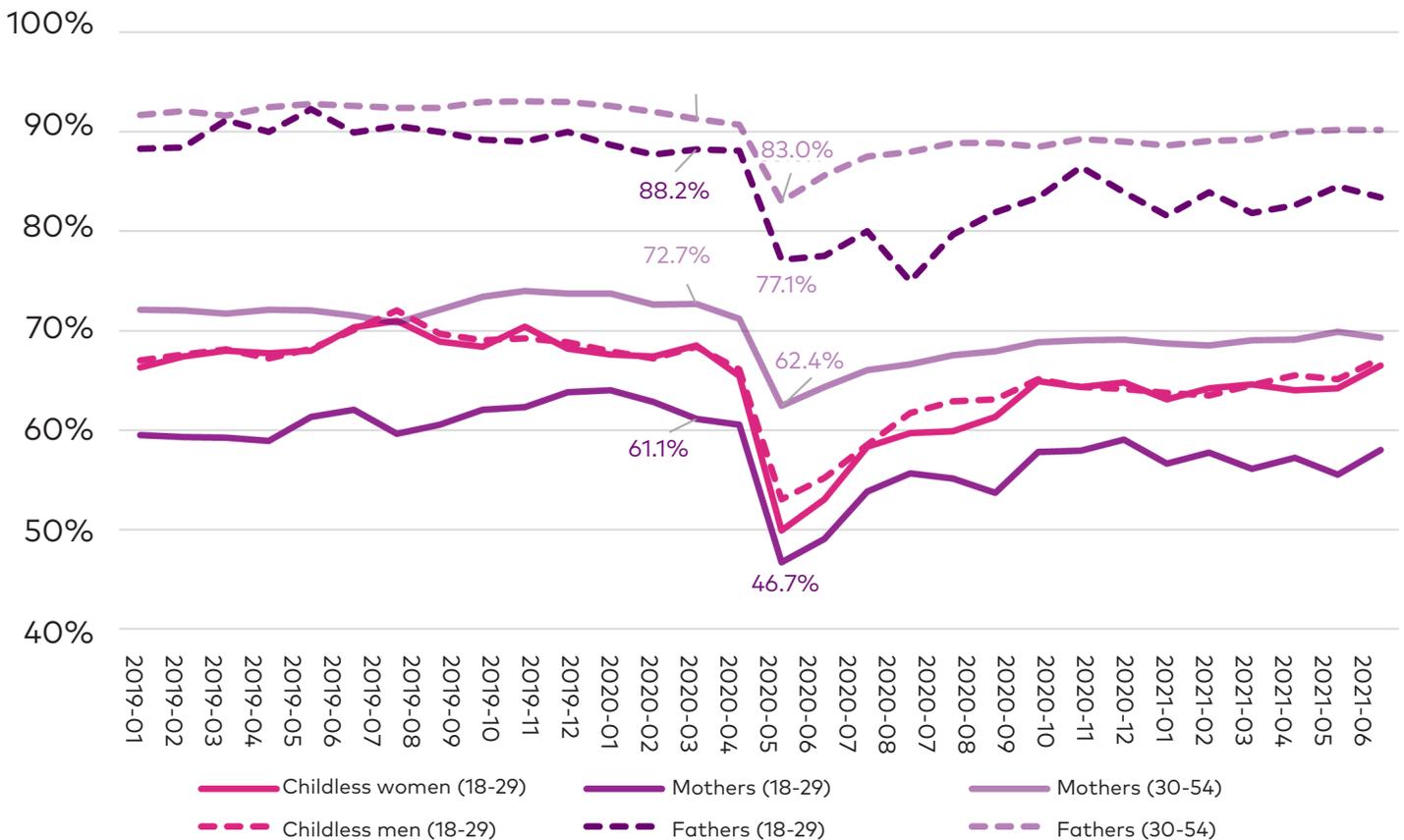
⁴ A family's net worth consists of its total assets minus its debts.

FOLLOWING A DECLINE IN EMPLOYMENT, YOUNG PARENTS STRUGGLE TO RECOVER

The economic recession following the pandemic lockdown further threatened young parents' economic security. At the height of the recession, both young mothers and young fathers experienced a larger decline in employment than older parents. Between February and April 2020, young mothers experienced the largest decline in employment levels among parents, dropping from 61.1 percent to 46.7 percent, a 23.6 percent decline. Young fathers' employment rate fell from 88.2 percent to 77.1 percent, a 12.6 percent decline, compared with a 9.1 percent decline among older fathers and a 14.2 percent decline among older mothers (Figure 2).⁵

While employment rates ticked up across all groups in May 2020, they remained lower than their pre-pandemic levels. Employment levels among young fathers remained low throughout the summer of 2020. Young mothers experienced a significant interruption in their recovery in September 2020, likely reflecting the effects of schools reopening. Young parents continue to experience a more uneven recovery.

FIGURE 2. Employment Rates by Gender, Parental Status, and Age Group



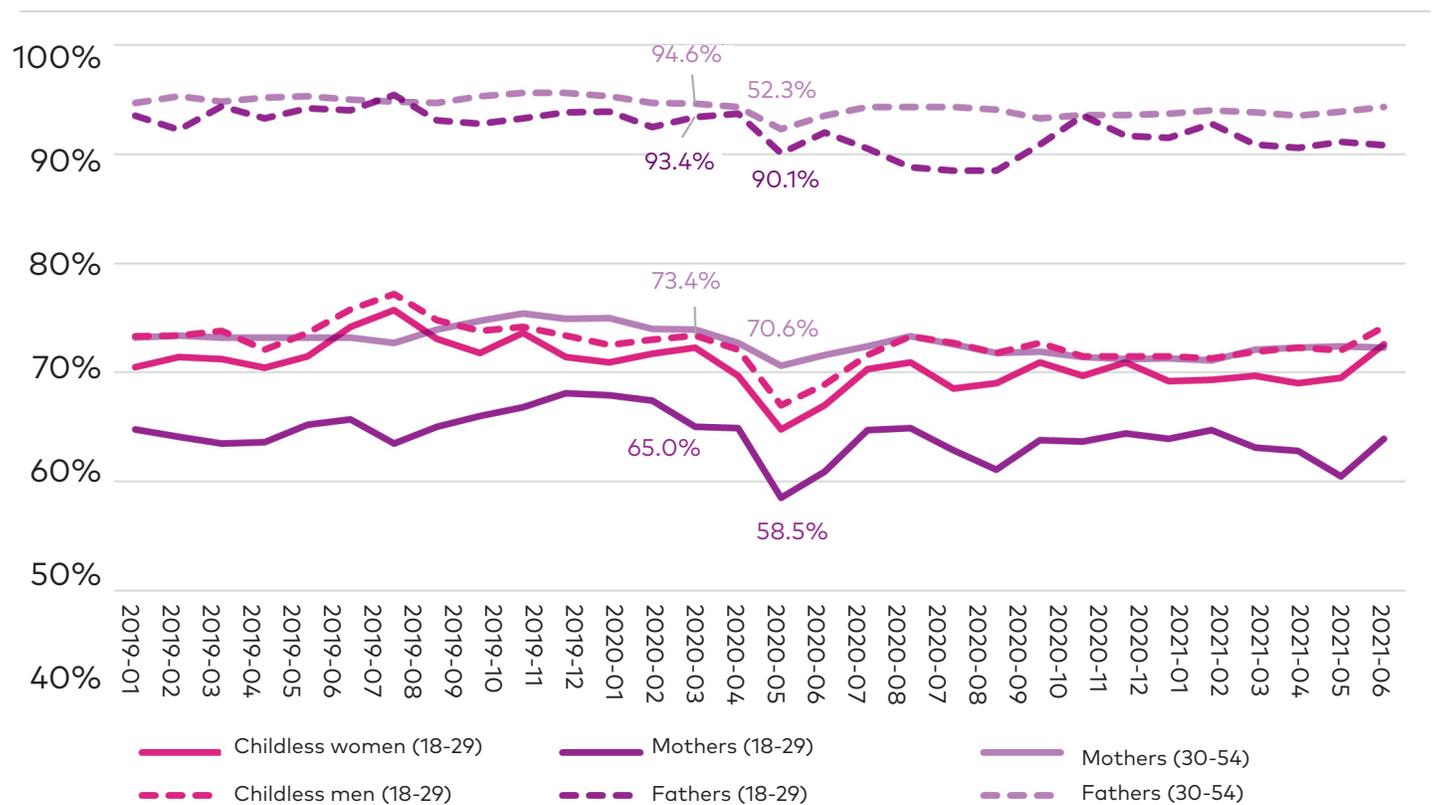
Notes: Results are weighted and not seasonally adjusted.

Source: IWPR analysis of the basic monthly Current Population Survey microdata (January 2019–June 2021); IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

⁵ The employment rate, or the employment-to-population ratio, is calculated as the proportion of individuals in the population who are employed. Percent decline in employment between February and April 2020 is calculated by subtracting the employment level in April 2020 from that in February 2020; this result is then divided by the employment level in February 2020.

Labor force participation shows similar trends (Figure 3).⁶ Shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, women held over half of U.S. payroll jobs for the first time in nearly a decade (Omeokwe 2020). Young mothers' labor force participation rates reached a high point at the end of 2019. The pandemic has led to a record number of women exiting the labor force. More than 2.5 million women have dropped out of the workforce in the past year, bringing down women's labor force participation to 57 percent (Ewing-Nelson 2021). At its lowest point in April 2020, 58.5 percent of young mothers were in the labor force, a 6.5 percentage point decline from their February level (Figure 3). The magnitude of labor force participation decline is larger among young mothers than young fathers and older parents, pointing to an outsized impact of the dual crises in public health and the economy on young mothers.

FIGURE 3. Labor Force Participation Rates by Gender, Parental Status, and Age Group



Notes: Results are weighted and not seasonally adjusted.

Source: IWPR analysis of the basic monthly Current Population Survey microdata (January 2019–June 2021); IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Child Care Crisis and Gendered Division of Labor

Even before the pandemic, young mothers' employment level (Figure 2) and labor force participation rates (Figure 3) remained significantly lower than those of any other group. The gender gap in employment and labor force participation rates among young parents far exceeds that of young adults without children living in the same household and that of older parents. By contrast, the employment rates of young women without children closely tracks

⁶ The labor force participation rate is the proportion of individuals in the population who are employed plus those who are unemployed but are either actively looking for work or on temporary layoff.

those of their male counterparts. Given that over 70 percent of young parents have children at or under 3 years old with intensive child care needs, this larger gender gap among young parents reflects persistent gender disparities in child care responsibilities.

The majority of families in the U.S. lacks access to affordable child care, with more than half of families living in “child care deserts” (Malik et al. 2018). When the pandemic caused many early childhood centers to close, working mothers with young children suffered major disruptions, leading many to leave the labor force.

Job Concentration in Hardest-Hit Industries with No Remote Work

The large initial decline in employment levels among young parents at the beginning of the pandemic could partly be due to young workers’ concentration in job sectors that were hit the hardest by the economic downturn. Table 2 shows the industries where working parents were concentrated immediately before the pandemic (2019). Larger percentages of older parents than younger parents worked in professional jobs that allow for more schedule flexibility and the ability to work from home, such as those in professional and business services; and financial activities.

A large share of young mothers was employed in sectors where job losses have been particularly severe, including leisure and hospitality (15.6 percent), education and health services (34.8 percent), and retail (13.1 percent). Service industries tend to offer low-wage jobs lacking flexible schedules, the ability to work from home, and key fringe benefits such as paid leave and health insurance (Schneider and Harknett 2019, 2020). Young fathers were mostly likely to be employed in construction and manufacturing, which also suffered significant decline during the early stages of the pandemic (Hegewisch, Barsi, and Hayes 2020).

TABLE 2. Percentages of Working Parents in the Top 5 Industries Where They Concentrate, by Gender and Age Group, 2019

Mothers aged 18 to 29		Fathers aged 18 to 29	
Educational and health services	34.8%	Construction	18.3%
Leisure and hospitality	15.6%	Manufacturing	16.2%
Retail	13.1%	Professional and business services	10.6%
Professional and business services	8.7%	Retail	9.9%
Financial activities	6.7%	Transportation and utilities	9.5%
Mothers aged 30 to 54		Fathers aged 30 to 54	
Educational and health services	40.5%	Professional and business services	14.4%
Professional and business services	11.4%	Construction	14.2%
Financial activities	8.2%	Manufacturing	14.1%
Retail	8.2%	Educational and health services	11.1%
Manufacturing	6.4%	Transportation and utilities	8.4%

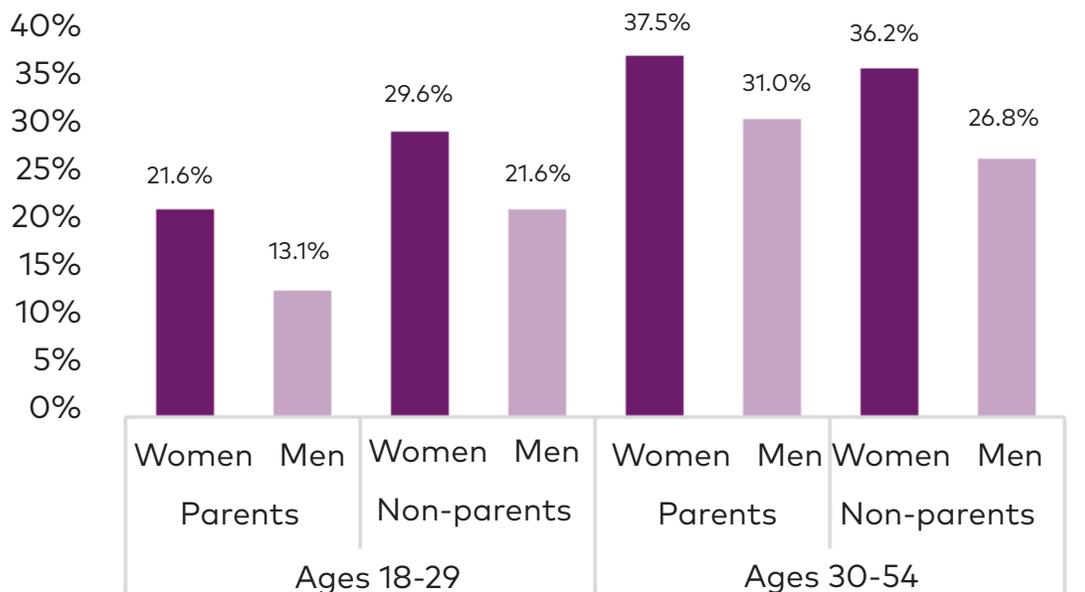
Notes: Results are weighted.

Source: IWPR analysis of the basic monthly Current Population Survey microdata (January to December 2019 pooled), IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

In the midst of a public health crisis, stay-at-home orders meant that many employers allowed employees to work from home. To a certain extent, the ability to work from home permits workers to more effectively juggle work and family obligations. However, the nature of work in certain job sectors and occupations makes remote work difficult if not impossible to perform (e.g., manufacturing, construction, and frontline service jobs).

Figure 4 shows the percentage of employed workers who worked from home at any time in the last four weeks due to the pandemic, between May and August 2020. The shares of young mothers and young fathers who teleworked or worked from home during this period (21.6 percent and 13.1 percent, respectively) are the smallest among employed workers of the same gender. These patterns likely reflect the job sectors and occupations where young mothers and fathers concentrate.

FIGURE 4. Workers Who Teleworked or Worked at Home at Any Time in the Last Four Weeks Due to COVID-19, May to August 2020



Notes: Results are weighted.

Source: IWPR analysis of the basic monthly Current Population Survey microdata (May to August 2020 pooled), IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Taken together, the slow and difficult recovery patterns for young parents may be attributed to a combination of the job sectors that young mothers and fathers concentrate in and intensified responsibilities for taking care of young children during pandemic lockdowns, especially for parents who were unable to work at home. Compared with older parents, a larger share of younger parents has lost their jobs and source of income. Another large portion of young parents must work on-site. Many of them were classified as “essential workers” and had to report to work while access to child care declined significantly, increasing the strain of balancing work and family obligations. They also face elevated health threats during a pandemic. These challenges are especially pronounced for single parents.

EMPLOYMENT LEVELS FELL MOST SHARPLY AMONG YOUNG SINGLE MOTHERS

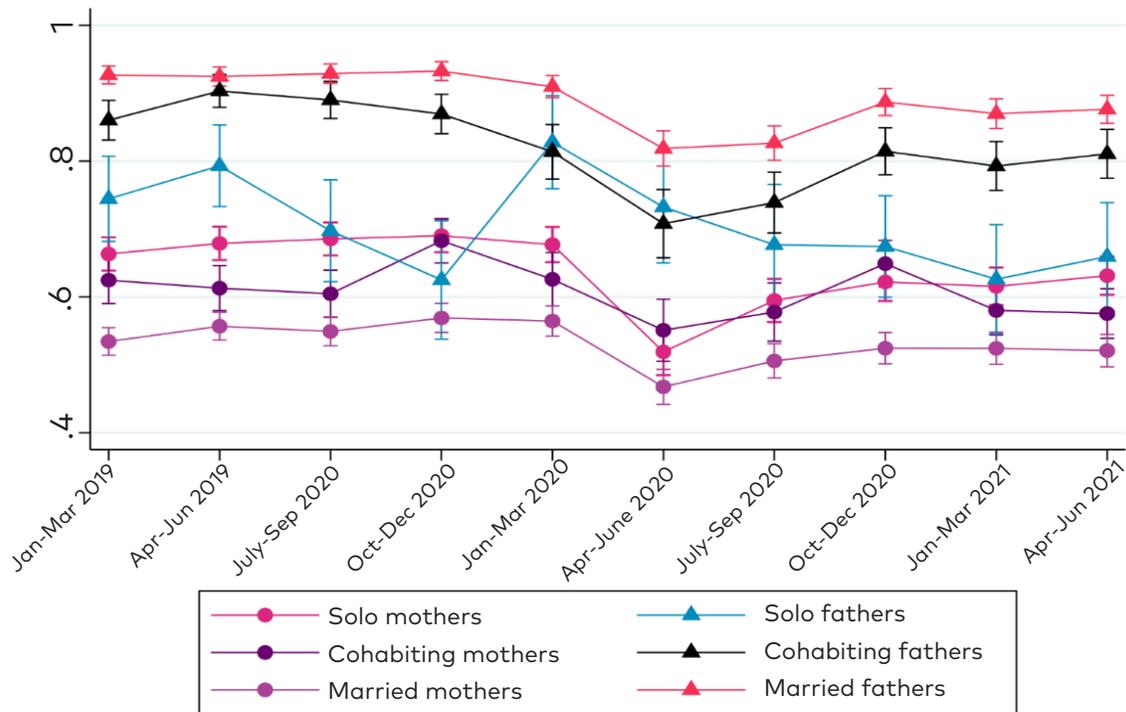
Even among young mothers, not all experienced the pandemic recession the same way. Single mothers are particularly vulnerable to turbulent economic times due to their typically lower wages, a punitive social welfare system, and a lack of affordable child care. Young Black and Latina mothers currently represent 57.5 percent of all young single parents.⁷

To examine how the employment levels before and during the pandemic vary by gender and marital/cohabitation status among young parents, Figure 5 presents the predicted probabilities of employment for each subgroup.⁸ The largest gender gap in employment (and labor force participation rates, in results not shown) is observed among married parents—married mothers had the lowest rates, while married fathers had the highest. Young single mothers had a higher level of employment than young married mothers and, to a lesser extent, young cohabiting mothers. Young single mothers rely more heavily on their own earnings because they have fewer other sources of support for their families. Despite their overall higher employment levels, single mothers experienced the sharpest decline in employment levels at the height of the pandemic recession, dropping from 67.7 percent in the first quarter of 2020 to 51.9 percent in the second quarter.

⁷ IWPR's calculation using the basic monthly Current Population Survey data (January to December 2020 pooled).

⁸ Quarterly instead of monthly data are used for this part of the analysis to improve the reliability of the estimates by allowing for sufficient sample sizes across gender and type of parents. The outcome variable is employment status of the current month (employed=1, not employed=0). Probabilities with 95% confidence intervals are estimated from separate logistic regression models by gender that interact marital/cohabitation status with quarterly period. The basic models do not include any demographic controls.

FIGURE 5. Predicted Probabilities of Being Employed, by Gender and Marital/Cohabitation Status



Notes: Figure 5 presents the predicted probabilities with 95% confidence intervals calculated based on coefficients from the basic model without controls. “Parents” only include those living with one of their own children. “Solo parents” (or “single parents”) refers to parents who are not living with a spouse or partner, including a small share of parents who are married but not living with a spouse or partner. “Cohabiting parents” are parents who are living with a partner to whom they are not married. “Married parents” are married and living with a spouse.

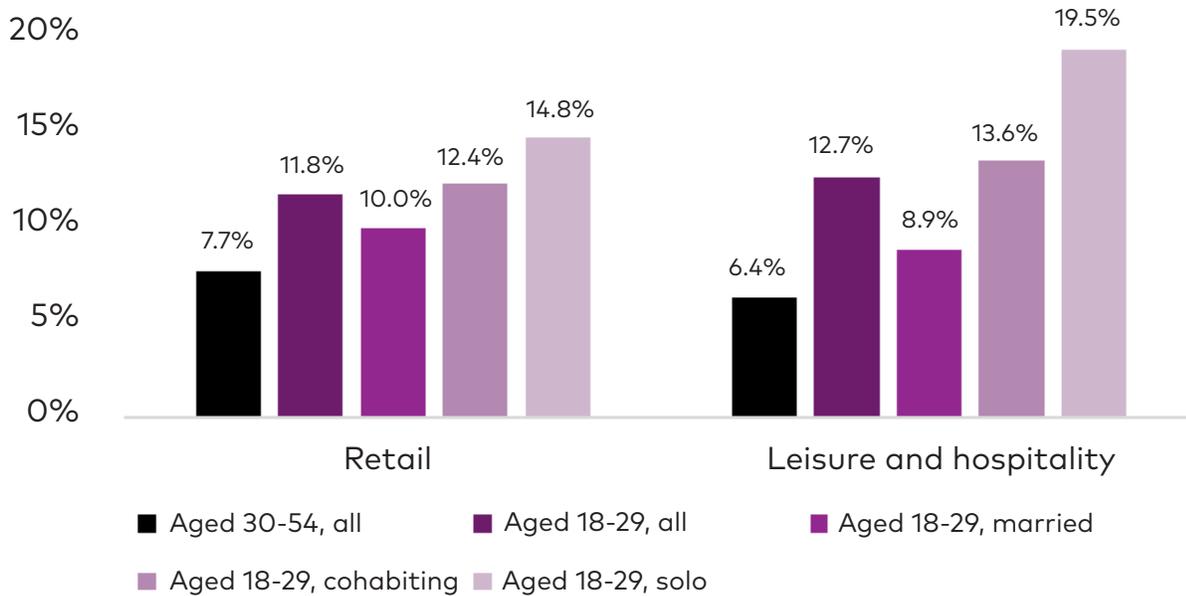
Source: IWPR analysis of the basic monthly Current Population Survey microdata (monthly data pooled into quarterly data), IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Multivariate regression analysis further suggests that single mothers’ disproportionate decline in employment level holds even when key demographic characteristics, including race/ethnicity, educational attainment, family income strata, school enrollment status, and age, have been taken into account (see Table A1).

Industry might have played a large role in the differences observed across marital/cohabitation statuses. In 2019, a greater share of young single parents worked in retail (14.8 percent) and leisure and hospitality (19.5 percent) industries than older parents and young married or cohabiting parents (Figure 6). Job losses were particularly severe in these sectors during the pandemic-induced recession (Hegewisch, Barsi, and Hayes 2020). Moreover, low-wage service-sector jobs tend to lack key benefits such as paid leave, health insurance, and predictable schedules (Schneider and Harknett 2019 2020). Many working parents in these industries—performing work in jobs deemed “essential”—had trouble finding reliable child care during a time when schools and child care centers were shut down. For many, this meant being forced out of the workforce altogether. Single parents who could not afford to forego a paycheck face not only elevated strain in balancing work and family needs, but also health threats associated with working directly with customers during a pandemic. High concentration in low-wage, service-sector jobs with erratic schedules and no paid leave creates significant challenges for young single parents in terms of work-family conflict,

difficult childcare arrangements, and parenting struggles. The pandemic has exacerbated these challenges.

FIGURE 6. Working Parents in Retail and Leisure and Hospitality Industries, by Age Group and Marital/Cohabitation Status, 2019



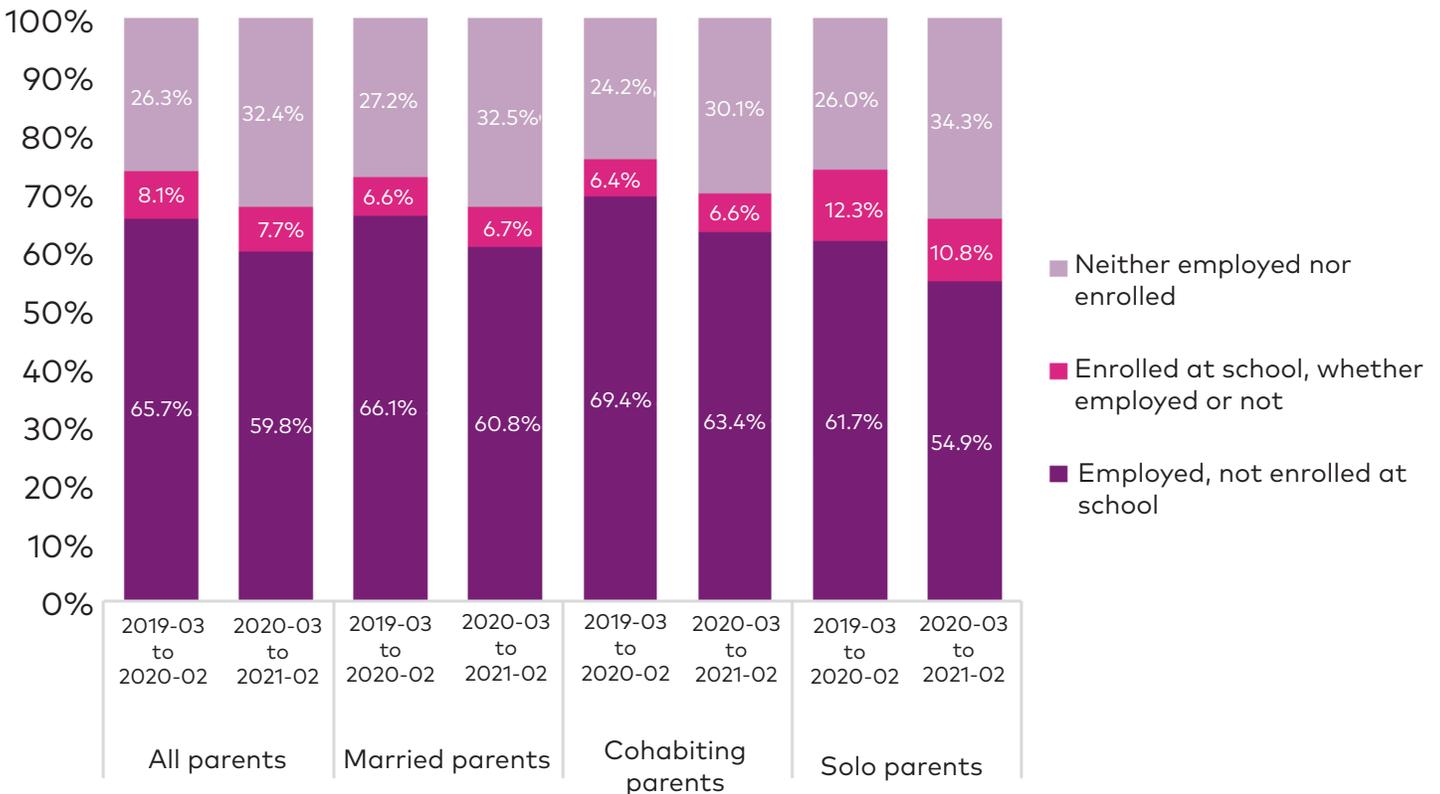
Notes: Results are weighted. “Parents” only include those living with one of their own children. “Solo parents” (or “single parents”) refers to parents who are not living with a spouse or partner, including a small share of parents who are married but not living with a spouse or partner. “Cohabiting parents” are parents who are living with a partner to whom they are not married. “Married parents” are married and living with a spouse.

Source: IWPR analysis of the basic monthly Current Population Survey microdata (January to December 2019 pooled), IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

YOUNG SINGLE PARENTS PUSHED OUT OF WORK AND OUT OF SCHOOL DURING THE PANDEMIC

Many young parents manage work and child care responsibilities while pursuing education. In the year before March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic first broke out in the U.S., a total of 8.1 percent of young parents aged 18 to 29 were enrolled at school, regardless of employment status (Figure 7). The share of young single parents enrolled at school was even higher (12.3 percent) during this period.

FIGURE 7. Young Parents (Aged 18 to 29) Employed, Enrolled at School, or Neither Employed nor Enrolled, by Marital/Cohabitation Status, in the Year Before March 2020 and the Year After



Notes: Results are weighted. “Parents” only include those living with one of their own children. “Solo parents” (or “single parents”) refers to parents who are not living a spouse or partner, including a small share of parents who are married but not living with a spouse or partner. “Cohabiting parents” are parents who are living with a partner to whom they are not married. “Married parents” are married and living with a spouse.
Source: IWPR analysis of the basic monthly Current Population Survey microdata (March 2019 to February 2020 pooled and March 2020 to February 2021 pooled), IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

For young parents, combining work and education is associated with higher earnings at age 30 (Sick, Vilter, and Spaulding 2019). Yet young parents face substantial obstacles to completing their education as they navigate the complex demands of their children and their own needs. Before the pandemic, young parents balancing work with education or training on average spent 46.5 hours a week in work or education activities combined; among those who paid out-of-pocket child care costs, they typically spent 14 percent of household income on child care—twice what the federal government recommends for a household (Sandstrom et al. 2019).

These challenges are especially pronounced for the 1.7 million single mother college students, who represent nearly 10 percent of U.S. undergraduate students and nearly 90 percent have incomes at or near the federal poverty line (Reichlin Cruse et al. 2019). Single mothers in college on average spent more than nine hours on caring labor each day, and 62 percent of single mother students worked 20 hours or more each week for pay, leaving little additional time for homework, sleep, exercise, or self-care (Reichlin Cruse et al. 2018, 2019). The cost burden for care relative to their family earnings is also much higher (18 percent) among young single parents balancing work with school or training (Sandstrom et al. 2019). As a result, single parents have markedly lower college degree attainment rates than other adults (Hensly, White, and Reichlin Cruse 2021).

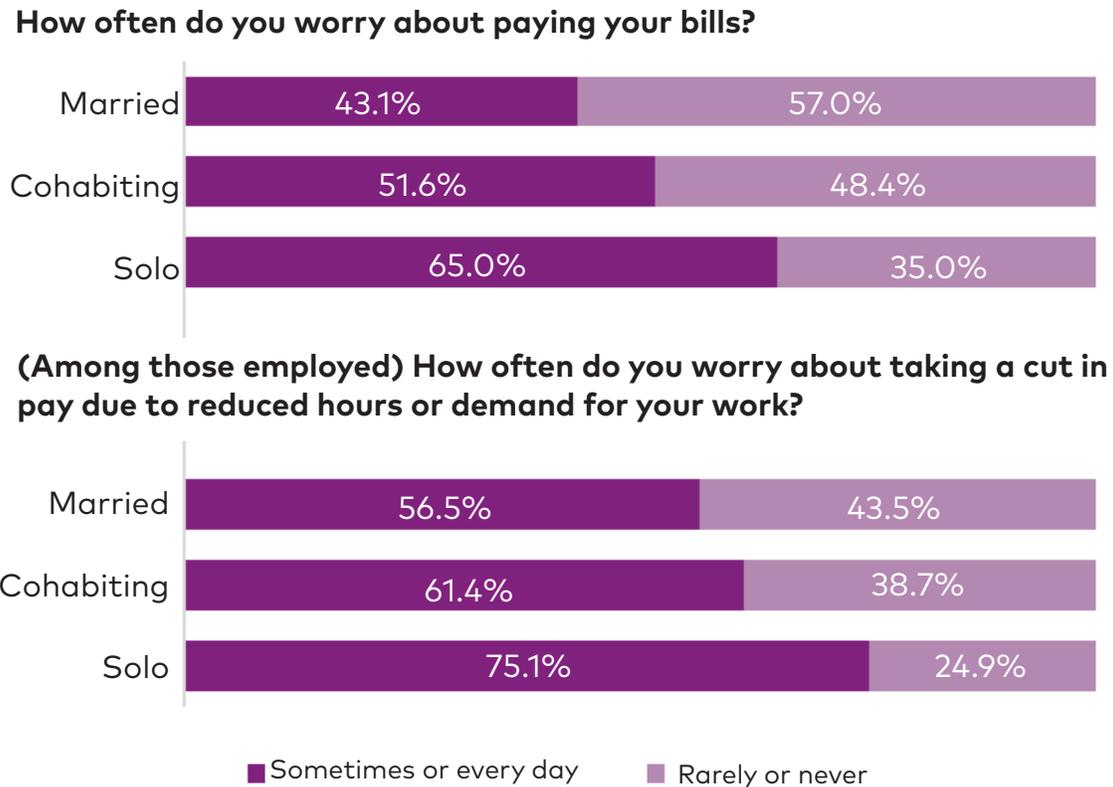
The pandemic disrupted both the employment and education of young parents. Comparing the year immediately before the COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S. and the year after, the share of young parents who are neither employed nor enrolled in school increased from 26.3 percent to 32.4 percent (Figure 7). The increase is the largest among young single parents (again, nearly 90 percent of whom are single mothers), from 26.0 percent to 34.3 percent. Such disruption will likely impact young parents' long-term economic security and career prospects.

YOUNG SINGLE MOTHERS WORRY THE MOST ABOUT ECONOMIC INSECURITY

Turbulence in the labor market and the collapse of the care infrastructure during the pandemic undermined economic security among families, especially those headed by a younger parent. In June 2021, IWPR surveyed 1,421 women aged 18 to 34 years to gain a better understanding of how they are faring in the wake of the pandemic-induced recession. Findings from the survey highlight the economic vulnerability of young mothers, especially young single mothers, long after the pandemic-induced recession hit its official low, showing signs of recovery.⁹ A large share of young single mothers (65.0 percent) reported that they worry about paying their bills sometimes or every day, which is significantly higher than young married (43.1 percent) and young cohabiting mothers (51.6 percent; Figure 8). Among those who are employed, young mothers across the board worry about taking a cut in pay due to reduced hours or demand for their work. Three out of four (75.1 percent) young single mothers said they worry about taking a cut in pay sometimes or every day, compared with 56.5 percent of young married and 61.4 percent of young cohabiting mothers.

⁹ The Business Cycle Dating Committee of the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) has determined that a trough in monthly economic activity occurred in April 2020 (see <https://www.nber.org/news/business-cycle-dating-committee-announcement-july-19-2021>).

FIGURE 8. Indicators of Economic Security Among Young Mothers Ages 18 To 34, by Marital/ Cohabitation Status, June 2021



Notes: Results are weighted. "Solo parents" refers to parents who are not living with a spouse or partner, including a small share of parents who are married but not living with a spouse or partner. "Cohabiting parents" are parents who are living with a partner to whom they are not married. "Married parents" are married and living with a spouse. The sample size for "How often do you worry about paying your bills?" is 558, including 157 solo mothers, 145 cohabiting mothers, and 256 married mothers. The sample size for "(Among those employed) How often do you worry about taking a cut in pay due to reduced hours or demand for your work?" is 391, including 116 solo mothers, 100 cohabiting mothers, and 175 married mothers.

Source: Analysis of the IWPR Survey on the Status of Younger Women (June 2021).

Even before the pandemic, a disproportionate number of families led by single parents were living in poverty, and low-income families face concentrated disadvantage marked by economic insecurity. Lost jobs and income during the pandemic recession plunged these families into deep economic crisis, leaving them struggling to afford basic needs such as food and housing. Because young single parents disproportionately hold low-wage jobs and come from Black and Hispanic families that lack access to the same level of wealth as White families, they are not getting the level of support that young White parents receive.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Findings from this brief underscore the diverse yet widespread challenges that young parents have experienced during the pandemic. Young parents, regardless of gender and marital/cohabitation status, suffered disproportionate declines in employment at the height of the recession and have been on a bumpy road of recovery ever since. Young parents, especially single mothers, have fewer economic resources to draw on when navigating a crisis. Without sufficient supports, young single mothers bore the brunt of the pandemic in their dual roles of primary breadwinner and caregiver.

An investment in support systems for the most vulnerable young parent families is an investment in an equitable future. The pandemic has exposed the fragility of the U.S. healthcare system and social safety net. Young parents' particular vulnerability during economic downturns calls for long-term, systemic support to help them navigate the transition to adulthood while taking care of young children. Policy recommendations include:

- **Prioritize equal access to affordable, high-quality child care for all parents.** Expanding child care and early education programs would ensure that eligible parents can obtain child care whether they are employed, looking for work, or pursuing education or training, and would increase families' disposable income and standard of living. A key to strengthening the child care infrastructure is to enhance compensation, labor protection, and professional development for care workers and educators. To help student parents in particular, policymakers and higher education leaders should improve access to quality child care by expanding the Child Care Access Means Parent in Schools (CCAMPIS) and Early Head Start/Head Start programs on college campuses or building connection with local child care resource and referral agencies; states should improve state child care subsidy eligibility rules to count higher education and training towards work requirements and to allow all types of educational degrees (Reichlin Cruse et al. 2019).
- **Make the Child Tax Credit permanent and available to all parents.** The American Rescue Plan recently increased the Child Tax Credit for tax year 2021, from \$2,000 a year per child to \$3,000 per child for children aged six through 17 and to \$3,600 per child for those aged under six, which are projected to lift millions of children out of poverty. Although young single parents would benefit disproportionately from this measure, the current tax code denies such parents the full enhanced Child Tax Credit payments (González-Ramírez 2021). To protect the most vulnerable young parents and their children, assistance like the enhanced Child Tax Credit should be made permanent, inclusive, and easily accessible.
- **Federal benefit programs should suspend work requirements for participating in programs** such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) childcare assistance, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). As the pandemic wreaks havoc on the economy, 13 states continue to require residents to work or look for a job to qualify for monthly TANF cash assistance. With a few exceptions, since February 2020, TANF caseloads declined much more dramatically in these states than in states that halted or relaxed the work rules (Goldstein 2021). The work rules not only created a conundrum for the millions of

workers who need assistance when they lost their jobs during the pandemic, but also may have forced many to take low-wage jobs with elevated health risks.

- **Young unemployed parents and low-income families should receive sustained, enhanced economic support.** Pandemic relief measures such as Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), tax relief on unemployment benefits, and short-term TANF Pandemic Emergency Assistance should be made long term and easily accessible. In addition, Congress and state legislatures should provide ongoing food assistance, housing assistance, rent and mortgage freezes to families in need. In the long run, investing in more affordable housing would help create a stable base for young parents and their children.
- **All workers should receive paid sick days and paid family and medical leave.** Paid sick days and paid family and medical leave can provide workers with caregiving commitments the chance to take the necessary time off while staying in their jobs. While access to paid leave has increased through pandemic relief programs, this access should be expanded to cover all workers and should be made permanent.
- **Low-wage workers should receive higher pay and enhanced workplace rights and protections.** Raising the federal minimum wage would boost total annual wages for low-wage workers in hardest-hit sectors. Higher wages need to be accompanied by enhanced rights and protections for workers, including the right to organize, the right to safety and health, and the protection against sexual harassment, among others. Such improvements would disproportionately benefit young workers and Black and Latina women, who are more likely to be employed in lower-wage service jobs.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1. Logistic Regression Coefficients, Employment for Young Parents, Ages 18 to 29, by Gender

	Mothers		Fathers	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Type of parent (ref. Solo parent)				
Married parent	-0.481*** (0.076)	-0.967*** (0.079)	0.739** (0.265)	0.442 (0.320)
Cohabiting parent	-0.225* (0.105)	-0.354** (0.109)	-0.095 (0.280)	-0.086 (0.330)
Quarter (ref. Jan-Mar 2020)				
Jan-Mar 2019	-0.063 (0.083)	-0.047 (0.084)	-0.500+ (0.297)	-0.317 (0.357)
Apr-Jun 2019	0.008 (0.083)	0.038 (0.085)	-0.226 (0.308)	-0.110 (0.357)
Jul-Sep 2019	0.038 (0.083)	0.028 (0.085)	-0.735* (0.305)	-0.775* (0.363)
Oct-Dec 2019	0.061 (0.084)	0.069 (0.085)	-1.058*** (0.310)	-1.084** (0.363)
Apr-Jun 2020	-0.664*** (0.092)	-0.767*** (0.096)	-0.563+ (0.325)	-0.719+ (0.372)
Jul-Sep 2020	-0.356*** (0.090)	-0.455*** (0.093)	-0.830** (0.321)	-0.895* (0.370)
Oct-Dec 2020	-0.242** (0.086)	-0.291*** (0.088)	-0.842** (0.300)	-0.881* (0.363)
Jan-Mar 2021	-0.270** (0.085)	-0.283** (0.086)	-1.054*** (0.301)	-1.140** (0.356)
Apr-Jun 2021	-0.202* (0.086)	-0.223* (0.088)	-0.909** (0.304)	-0.842* (0.359)
Interactions (selected results presented)				
Married parent*Apr-Jun 2020	0.274* (0.116)	0.317** (0.120)	-0.239 (0.352)	-0.204 (0.397)
Cohabiting parent*Apr-Jun 2020	0.353* (0.157)	0.383* (0.165)	-0.027 (0.373)	0.039 (0.417)

TABLE A1. Logistic Regression Coefficients, Employment for Young Parents, Ages 18 to 29, by Gender

	Mothers		Fathers	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Race/ethnicity (ref. White, non-Hispanic)				
Black, non-Hispanic		0.020 (0.035)		-0.636*** (0.072)
Hispanic		-0.172*** (0.026)		-0.018 (0.059)
All other racial groups, non-Hispanic		-0.416*** (0.045)		-0.720*** (0.085)
Educational attainment (ref. College or more)				
High school or less		-0.641*** (0.033)		-0.419*** (0.092)
Associate's degree		-0.062 (0.044)		0.041 (0.128)
Family income strata (ref. Bottom 30%)				
Middle 40%		0.643*** (0.025)		1.078*** (0.053)
Top 30%		0.848*** (0.038)		1.173*** (0.087)
Enrolled in school		-0.276*** (0.039)		-1.482*** (0.085)
Age		0.056*** (0.004)		0.015 (0.010)
Constant	0.741*** (0.060)	-0.250+ (0.133)	1.570*** (0.245)	1.411*** (0.408)
Observations	50,289	50,289	23,993	23,993

Notes: Selected interaction terms are presented to focus on the comparison by marital/cohabitation status in their employment decline in the initial months of the pandemic-induced recession (Apr-Jun 2020). Results are weighted. Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.1

Source: IWPR analysis of the basic monthly Current Population Survey microdata (January 2019 to June 2021, monthly data pooled into quarterly data), IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

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