

Unemployment and child health during COVID-19 in the USA



The COVID-19 pandemic has led to high rates of unemployment across advanced economies.¹ The burdens associated with unemployment, however, have not hit all households equally. Families with children and unemployed parents have reported especially high rates of hardship, with potential long-term consequences for child wellbeing and development. The increase of parental unemployment in the USA necessitates greater attention towards these potential consequences.

First, the share of children with an unemployed parent (defined as jobless and looking for work) has reached historic highs in the USA, since the onset of the pandemic. In April, 2020, 21.7% of children had at least one unemployed parent, the highest rate observed since at least 1967.² By July, 2020, the share of children with an unemployed parent had dropped to 14.3%, which is still higher than the peak of 13.2% during the Great Recession in 2010. Mothers have been hit hardest; the share of children with an unemployed mother reached 18.8% in April, 2020, again the highest rate since at least 1967.²

The data also reveal that care responsibilities are driving down employment rates, in particular for mothers. Among all mothers between the ages of 25 and 44 who lost a job after the onset of the pandemic, 30% report care responsibilities as their primary reason for not being employed, as of July, 2020.^{3,4} Among fathers of a similar age, the rate who attribute their unemployment to care responsibilities is 15%. For mothers with children experiencing distance learning, the share reporting care responsibilities as their primary reason for unemployment is even higher (36%) than for mothers whose children are attending school in person (29%). This pattern suggests that school closures have increased the care burden for parents and for mothers, in particular.

The absence of employment, in itself, need not spell trouble for families. But, when joblessness is coupled with an inadequate welfare state and little support for domestic caregivers, unemployment can quickly translate into elevated rates of hardship. Indeed, evidence from the US Census Pulse Survey for July, 2020, shows that unemployed mothers with children report high rates of food insufficiency (24%), skipped or delayed medical appointments (47%), and frequent anxiety (46%).

These findings can have direct consequences for child development.⁵ Evidence shows that reduced economic resources and elevated stress affect children's academic achievement and behaviour.⁶ Moreover, long-term unemployment, lasting 6 months or more, can have particularly deleterious consequences for a family's poverty status and a child's physical wellbeing.⁷ In turn, children who experience longer durations of poverty or more income volatility, or both, are less likely to attain a college degree.⁸ They are also more likely to be unemployed themselves in young adulthood or, if employed, to earn a lower wage.⁹ Even among families who are eventually able to recoup their lost earnings, repeated swings of income volatility can still have negative consequences on a child's wellbeing.¹⁰

Policy makers have an opportunity to blunt this rise in hardship and the associated long-term costs for children. First, legislators should ensure ample income support for families with children, at least throughout the duration of the pandemic. The USA is one of few high-income countries without a child allowance, leaving millions of families without any direct income support from the government. Second, policy makers should place heavy emphasis on providing a safe return to school for children. Until children can safely return to school, parents will face an increased care burden, which, when coupled with inadequate income support, will further contribute to rising poverty and hardship.

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the costs of not rewarding domestic care work and not offering US families with children a source of unconditional income support. Without urgent action, children might reap the consequences of the current crisis for decades to come.

I declare no competing interests.

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