Women and Child Care in Illinois

A Survey of Working Mothers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted economic and educational systems. The economic downturn caused by the pandemic has had substantial and potentially long-term implications for women, with their labor force participation rate falling to its lowest level in three decades. Additionally, following the advice of public health experts, Illinois restricted face-to-face activities and closed in-person schools and day care facilities, exacerbating the existing child care crisis.

Child care needs have become more acute for working parents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- There are 1.6 million Illinois workers who have at least one child under the age of 14 years old.
- There are 2.1 million children in Illinois under age 13, including 928,000 ages 5 and younger.
- Just 19 percent of workers have access to paid family leave.
- Prior to the pandemic, 24 percent of Illinois' child care-aged children participated in a day care center or State-recognized family home, including 34 percent of children ages 5 and younger.
- Surveys show that 60 percent of working parents have no outside help in caring for children.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, 13 percent of working parents had to resign or reduce work hours due to lack of child care, and working mothers have been more likely to leave their jobs than working fathers.

The demands of caring for children increase inequality for women in the workforce.

- While women are less likely to be employed than men in Illinois, gender disparities in both employment and pay increase dramatically as workers become parents.
- Having young children decreases the overall employment rate for mothers by between 5 and 9 percent.
- While all working women face a pay gap relative to working men in Illinois, working mothers experience an additional 6 percent pay gap relative to working fathers.
- Prior research has linked access to affordable child care with higher workforce participation rates and wages for women.

A fall 2020 University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign survey of 1,030 working mothers in Illinois who were employed in March 2020 reveals the extent and impact of COVID-19 on the state's child care system and working mothers.

- 83 percent of working mothers experienced child care, school, or summer camp closures.
- Almost 40 percent of working mothers lost their jobs or were working fewer hours. For working mothers of color, nearly half reported similar outcomes.
- Among mothers who were able to continue working, only 35 percent were able to work from home, while 13 percent divided work time between household and job duties, and 52 percent were essential and frontline workers.
- 37 percent of working mothers spent at least 11 hours per week helping children with schoolwork. A total of 11 percent reported spending at least 30 hours per week aiding children with remote learning.

Pandemic-related child care demands created additional economic and career hardships for mothers who continued to work, particularly for women of color.

- Among mothers who continued working during the pandemic 55 percent worked fewer hours, 54 percent earned less income, and 60 percent reported that their job performance suffered.
- Negative economic consequences were more severe for working women whose children's schools and child care facilities had closed—60 percent worked fewer hours, 58 percent earned less income, and 66 percent reported that their job performance suffered.
- Among mothers of color still employed, more than half passed up work-related opportunities due to pandemic-related school and child care closures compared with 39 percent of White respondents.
- Working mothers compensated for income losses by delaying rent or mortgage payments (26 percent), spending less on food (26 percent), pulling from savings or retirement accounts (23 percent), delaying medical treatments (18 percent), and increasing credit card debt (17 percent).

A data-driven analysis reveals five key potential policy options to improve labor force participation, boost earnings, and help close gender pay gaps for working mothers.

- Safely reopen schools and child care facilities: The closures of schools and day care centers during the pandemic were directly linked with a 23 percent increase in working mothers reporting that their job performance had suffered and a 21 percent increase in working mothers reporting a loss of income.
- Implement flexible work schedules that promote work-life balance: Flexible work scheduling increased the likelihood of a working mother remaining employed by 9 percent and has been found to boost productivity, reduce absenteeism, and reduce worker turnover.
- Adopt paid family leave and paid sick leave policies: Access to paid leave increased the probability that a working mother remained employed by 10 percent and reduced her likelihood of experiencing a loss of income by 14 percent. Eight states have paid family leave policies and 13 states provide at least 5 days of paid sick leave for workers.
- Expand access to quality, safe, and affordable child care by doubling the investment in the Child Care Assistance Program and enacting a refundable child tax credit: Working mothers with high child care costs were 10 percent less likely to remain employed and 24 percent more likely to report that they suffered a loss of income.
- Strengthen workers' rights and increase union membership: While the probability that a working mother had access to onsite child care at her workplace was just 8 percent, it increased by 7 percent if she was a union member, nearly doubling her chances.

While COVID-19 exposed the fragility of Illinois' child care system, the child care crisis will continue well after the pandemic has ended. Businesses and elected officials in Illinois could consider increasing access to affordable child care programs, funding more before-school and after-school programs, and expanding flexible scheduling, paid leave, and collective bargaining rights to address the child care crisis and support working parents across the state.

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The Project for Middle Class Renewal's mission is to investigate the working conditions of workers in today's economy and elevate public discourse on issues affecting workers with research, analysis and education in order to develop and propose public policies that will reduce poverty, provide forms of representation to all workers, prevent gender, race, and LGBTQ+ discrimination, create more stable forms of employment, and promote middle-class paying jobs. Each year, the Project publishes critical research studies and holds education forums on contemporary public policies and practices impacting labor and workplace issues. If you would like to partner with the Labor Education Program in supporting the work of the Project or have questions about the Project please contact Robert Bruno, Director of the Labor Education Program, at (312) 996-2491.

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