

Measuring Wellbeing and Gender Gaps for Black and Latinx Mothers in Los Angeles, CA. During COVID-19

Contributors: Elia De la Cruz Toledo He, PhD. and Valentina Duque, PhD.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated economic differences and mental health disparities in communities of color, and it is crucial to understand the ways in which mothers in these communities are coping with the “new normal.” Through a partnership with a community-based organization —Community Coalition in South Los Angeles— we elevated the voices and perspectives of Black and Latinx mothers in Los Angeles (L.A.) County. Our survey collected data on gender differences related to stressors, housework, coping mechanisms, and mental health wellbeing in the context of COVID-19. We also captured unique testimonials on how the pandemic has upended parents’ lives.

Food insecurity remained unchanged for fathers before and during COVID-19, while it increased for mothers. We also found an increase in the use of public benefits for both parents, but with higher reliance for mothers even before COVID-19. A third of those who signed up for public benefits, since the pandemic started, received informal and formal support from family/friends and community organizations to do so. This highlights the importance of social networks and community organizations in times of crisis.

Parents struggled with employment instability. Fathers lost full-time jobs at a higher rate, but some transitioned into part-time jobs. In contrast, most mothers transitioned from full-time jobs to unemployment. The mothers that remained employed had to balance uneven workloads at home along with paid work. In parallel, mothers struggled with mental health issues. A fourth of mothers “felt nervous” or engaged in “non-stop worrying” more than half days or nearly every day. Mothers had higher levels of clinical depressive and anxiety symptoms, which resulted in a mental wellbeing gap of 6 to 7 percentage points between mothers and fathers. Mothers experienced worse physical health, but all parents struggled with reduced medical care.

Since the pandemic started, most parents were doing more work at home (i.e., household chores, childcare responsibilities, and supervision of online learning for their children). Our results suggest the division of labor was not equal before COVID-19. Unpaid work largely falls on mothers and during this pandemic their workload has increased, straining the balancing act of home responsibilities and paid work. During COVID-19 mothers are spending an additional 51 weekly hours on childcare and housework, compared to fathers. When online learning hours are added up, the unpaid hours’ gap increases to 56 weekly hours. On probabilistic models, we found that an increase in time spent on childcare since the pandemic started is associated to mothers’ deterioration of mental well-being.

To manage stress from COVID-19, a higher proportion of mothers relied on positive coping mechanisms such as talking to friends/family and listening to music, while a higher proportion of fathers reported an increase in alcohol consumption to cope with COVID-related stress.

Across the board, reduced medical care has been prominent for Black and Latinx mothers and this could be a latent problem with long term consequences. In addition, gender differences in

unpaid work, job losses, mental and physical health, and coping mechanisms have grown among L.A. parents. Policies that can provide relief to mothers should center on easing childcare needs. This will serve a dual purpose of improving a home-work balance and reducing stress/improving mental health.

Policy Recommendations

Universal childcare – families with young children are the most economically vulnerable, and parents need affordable, high-quality childcare. Black and Latinx families spend a large share of their incomes on childcare and are more likely to face inadequate supply. Access to affordable or free childcare could allow Black and Latinx families to thrive, could benefit children’s cognitive development and could improve mothers’ employment trajectories. Childcare is essentially the infrastructure needed for more women to (re)join the workforce, to increase their working hours or to shift unpaid to paid work. Black and Latinx mothers provide critical income to their households and by providing them with childcare options, their families and communities can greatly benefit. Quality care services for children, the elderly, and for people with disabilities can support families to better balance their care workloads.

Federal paid family leave – In the different states where paid family leave allows parents to take time off with wage replacement, research has found that leave-taking rates and leave duration increase, especially among disadvantaged parents. In addition, evidence shows that existing paid leave programs have minimal impacts on their employers. However, Black and Latinx workers are less likely to have access to paid leave compared to White workers. Statutory paid leave, with a progressive wage replacement schedule, can benefit Black and Latinx families by raising household income and by increasing the amount of time parents spend with their children. Universal paid maternity and paternity leave can help parents share caring responsibilities and can reduce mothers’ workloads at home.

Child allowances – In the U.S. one in six children live in poverty. In addition, Black and Latinx two-parent families have half the wealth of single-headed White families. To help households experiencing material hardship (prior COVID and/or during COVID), an option that has been widely analyzed by researchers is to convert the current Child Tax Credit to a child allowance by making it fully refundable. A recent study that documents the costs and benefits proposed in the “American Family Act” and “President Biden’s American Rescue Plan” found that the benefit to society from a conversion to child allowances is equal to over eight times the annual costs.