

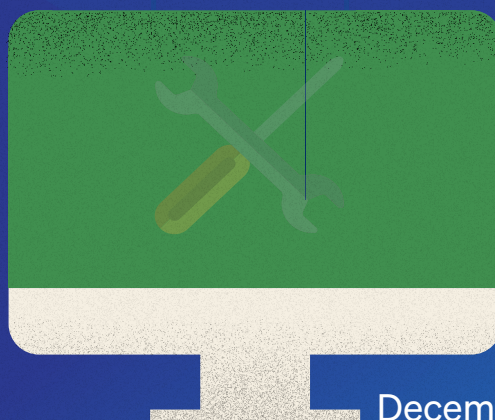


MONITORING POVERTY AND WELL-BEING IN NYC

SPOTLIGHT:

Job loss and recovery among mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Evidence from the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker



December 2025

KEY FINDINGS



About **1 in 4** mothers who were working before the pandemic stopped working within about six months after the March 2020 shutdown.



Reasons for work disruptions included both **job-related issues such as furlough or layoff** and **personal or family issues such as health or care-giving responsibilities**.



Working mothers with incomes below 200% of the poverty line were almost **twice as likely to stop working**. Mothers with less education were also more likely to stop working.



Mothers who could **work remotely were less likely to stop working**, as were those who had **access to paid sick leave and paid vacation time**.

By 2023, most mothers who stopped working in the six months after March 2020 had returned to work. However, disparities by education were apparent: mothers with a college degree were about 50% more likely to return to work than mothers without a college degree.

INTRODUCTION

Working mothers faced significant challenges due to COVID-19. Many lost jobs in the early months of the pandemic as businesses closed or laid off or furloughed their workers. Others left work because child care arrangements were disrupted, with many child care centers closing and schools providing remote instruction to children in their homes. In addition, especially in the first year of the pandemic, when COVID vaccines were not available and health care facilities were overcrowded, many parents were concerned that working might put them and their families at risk.

COVID-19 did not affect everyone equally. National studies have found that initial job losses were more severe for those who had less education or worked in lower-wage jobs. Employees who had more extensive in-person contact or who were unable to work remotely were also more severely affected.¹ Employment rates dropped more for women than men, and more for parents than non-parents.²

Lower-wage workers were also slower to return to work. Raj Chetty and colleagues reported that “the pandemic led to a short V-shaped recession for high-wage workers, but a prolonged reduction in employment for lower-wage workers that persisted until at least December 2021.”³ Mothers, particularly those with less education, may have returned to work more slowly than fathers, and earned lower wages when they did re-join the work force.⁴

This existing research raises concerns about the potential impact of the pandemic on inequality among New York City families. Using the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker, which surveyed New York City parents between 2017 and 2023, this spotlight examines job loss and recovery among families with young children during this time. We focused on these questions:

- What share of working mothers stopped working after the COVID-19 outbreak, and did those figures differ by income, education, and other indicators of advantage and disadvantage?
- How quickly did mothers return to work after the economy began to recover, and were there differences in employment by education and other indicators of advantage and disadvantage?

¹ Chetty, Friedman, Stepner, and Opportunity Insights Team, “The Economic Impacts of COVID-19.” Albanesi and Kim, “Effects of the COVID-19 Recession on the US Labor Market.” Montenegro, Jiang, Lozano-Rojas, Schmutte, Simon, Weinberg, and Wing, “Determinants of Disparities in Early COVID-19 Job Losses.”

² Montenegro, Jiang, Lozano-Rojas, Schmutte, Simon, Weinberg, and Wing, “Determinants of Disparities in Early COVID-19 Job Losses.” Goldin, “Understanding the Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Women.”

³ Chetty, Friedman, Stepner, and Opportunity Insights Team, “The Economic Impacts of COVID-19,” pp. 860-61.

⁴ Qian, Glauber, and Yavorsky, “COVID-19 Job Loss and Re-employment among Partnered Parents.”

About the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker

The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker (ECPT), a collaboration between Robin Hood and Columbia University, is a longitudinal study of New York City families with young children. Launched in 2017 when the children were between the ages of 0 and 2, the ECPT has followed a representative sample of families with young children in New York City until 2023, to provide a detailed description of the challenges and resources that shape the development of children during the critical early years of life. The ECPT study uses repeated surveys with the same parents to understand how families' circumstances change as their children grow and develop. The baseline survey included 1,576 parents, each of whom reported on a "focal child" who was 0–35 months old in June 2017 or was born in the subsequent year. Since the baseline survey, parents have been surveyed several times per year about the focal child's health and development, enrollment in school or child care, and family circumstances, including economic conditions, health, and well-being. When statistically weighted, the ECPT children are representative of children born in New York City during the specified period and living in New York City in 2017-18. For more details about the methods used in the ECPT and for a profile of our sample, see our baseline report.⁵

About this report

This report relied on surveys conducted between 2019 and 2023 to describe mothers' employment before and immediately after the COVID-19 outbreak and then to track their employment between the winter of 2020-21 and summer 2023. The analysis was limited to mothers because employment patterns vary by gender, and the ECPT sample does not include enough fathers to obtain reliable results for them.

For most of the sample, our measure of stopping work is based on comparing employment status in the last survey completed on or before March 15, 2020, with the first survey completed after that date. (Most of these post-COVID surveys were completed during the summer of 2020.) Mothers were counted as employed if they reported working full-time or part-time or were self-employed at the time of the survey. For a small number of cases, we used retroactive survey questions from 2021 to determine whether mothers had stopped working after the pandemic began. Note that this measure may not capture very short-term spells of joblessness: for instance, if a respondent was employed in February 2020, stopped working in March and April, and returned to work in June, they would likely not be counted as stopping work.

To track changes in employment status during the recovery period, we used the current employment status questions included in the five surveys between winter 2020-21 and summer 2023.

We considered two characteristics of the job held pre-COVID-19. The first was whether the job could be done remotely, based on a retroactive question from the summer 2020 survey. The second was

⁵ Neckerman, Brooks-Gunn, Doran, Kennedy, Maury, Waldfogel, and Wimer, "The Youngest New Yorkers: The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker."

whether the job offered paid sick leave and paid vacation days, based on a survey conducted in the summer and fall of 2019.

Education, race and ethnicity, and nativity were measured in the ECPT baseline survey. Poverty (measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure, or SPM), partner status, and number of children were measured at each annual survey. New York City residence was measured at each survey wave. For cases who completed their 2019-20 annual survey after March 2020, we estimated pre-pandemic poverty using a weighted average of the SPM income-to-needs ratio from the 2019-20 annual survey and the previous annual survey.

Work disruptions after the pandemic began

Work disruptions were widespread among working mothers in the ECPT sample. About one quarter (26%) of working mothers stopped working within about 6 months after the shutdown in March 2020. By mid-2021, more than a third of working mothers (36%) reported losing either work or pay because of the pandemic.

Consistent with other evidence on mothers' work during this time, these work disruptions reflected both job-related and personal reasons. About 9 months after the pandemic began, we asked respondents who lost work or pay because of COVID-19 about the specific reasons for these disruptions (Table 1). Nearly 3 in 4 cited job-related reasons such as cuts in hours or layoffs, while nearly 2 in 3 cited personal reasons, most often the closure of school or child care centers. Among mothers with work disruptions, 40% of mothers cited both job-related and personal challenges.

Table 1

Reasons respondents lost work or pay

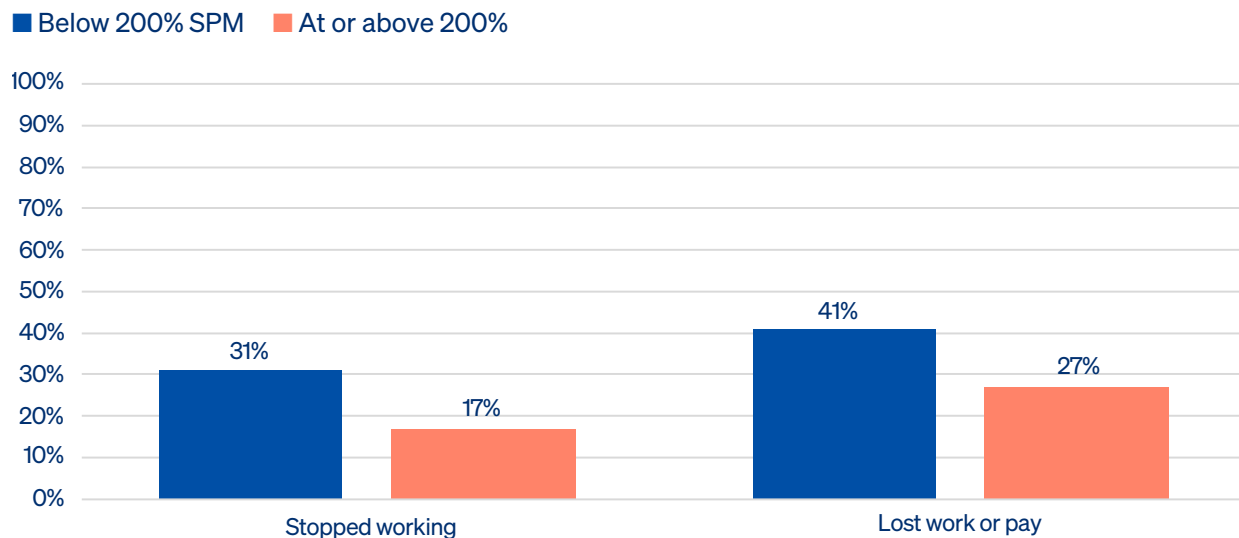
	% citing reason
Job-related reasons	73%
Workplace was closed	48%
Hours or pay were cut	34%
Laid off or furloughed	19%
Less tips or commissions	14%
Personal (health or care-giving) reasons	63%
School or child care closed	54%
Sick or quarantining	30%
Caring for someone with COVID	13%
Job-related reasons only	34%
Personal reasons only	23%
Job-related and personal reasons	40%

Note: Weighted tabulations from the ECPT summer 2021 follow-up survey (N=211). Respondents who had worked since January 1, 2020 and reported that they had lost work or pay due to COVID were asked these questions. Respondents not living in New York City at the time of the survey were excluded.

While the impact of the pandemic was felt broadly across the city, low-income parents — those with pre-pandemic incomes below 200% of the poverty line — were nearly twice as likely to stop working after COVID as their higher-income peers. Low-income parents were also more likely to report employment disruptions including reduction in work or pay.

Figure 1

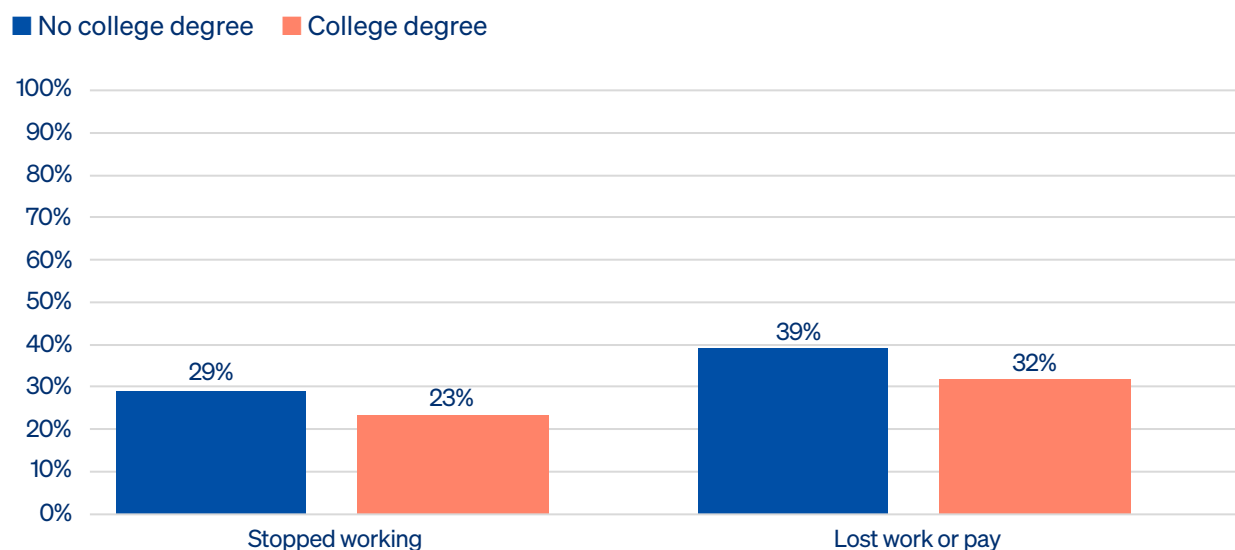
Work disruption among higher- and lower-income working mothers



Source: Weighted tabulations from ECPT surveys fielded between summer 2019–summer 2021 (N=569–572). See the text box above for construction of the measure of stopping work. Reported loss of work or pay among mothers who worked prior to the pandemic is drawn from a survey fielded in summer 2021. Pre-pandemic poverty is measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure. Respondents not living in New York City at the time of these surveys were excluded.

Figure 2

Work disruption among working mothers with and without a college degree



Source: Weighted tabulations from ECPT surveys fielded between summer 2019–summer 2021 (N=575–598). See the text box above for construction of the measure of stopping work. Reported loss of work or pay among mothers who worked prior to the pandemic is drawn from a survey fielded in summer 2021. Respondents not living in New York City at the time of these surveys were excluded.

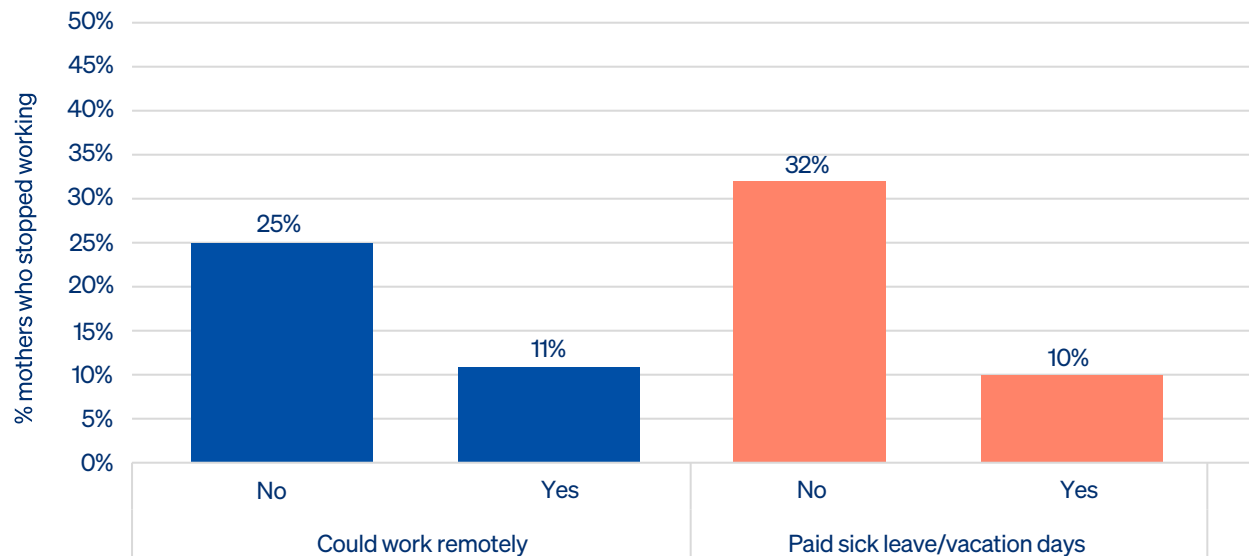
Working mothers with less education were also more likely to stop working or to lose work or pay because of the pandemic than their higher-educated peers, although the differences were not as large as those by income (Figure 2). To learn more about these disparities, we used a statistical model to adjust for demographic characteristics that might also affect mothers’ employment, such as family type, number of children, race or ethnicity, and nativity. Based on prior studies, which highlight the importance of remote work and other job characteristics, we also examined the kinds of jobs mothers held pre-COVID-19, specifically whether the work they did could be done remotely and whether the job offered paid sick leave and vacation days.

The results highlight the importance of those pre-COVID-19 job characteristics (Figure 3). **Women who said the work they did could be done remotely were significantly less likely to stop working.** Benefits were also important: **mothers whose job provided paid sick leave or vacation days were significantly less likely to stop working.**

While we don’t know exactly why mothers with these kinds of jobs were less likely to stop working, it is notable that both job characteristics offer advantages that are especially important to working mothers: by allowing mothers to work remotely at a time that their children may be unable to attend school or child care, and by allowing paid time off to deal with illness or other family contingencies, these types of jobs made it easier for mothers to combine work and family responsibilities. In addition, being able to work remotely would be valuable for mothers who were concerned that working in person might pose risks to their health or the health of vulnerable family members.

Figure 3

Percentage of working mothers who stopped work after COVID, by possibility of remote work and paid sick leave/vacation days



Source: ECPT surveys fielded between summer 2018–summer 2021; cases included in the analysis are mothers who worked pre-COVID (see definition above) (N=626). The figure displays predicted values based on a weighted logistic regression adjusting for race/ethnicity, nativity, partnered status, number of children, work limitations due to health, New York City residence, and education. Remote work possibility was a retrospective question asked in the first survey fielded after the pandemic began, and referred to the work the respondent did before COVID. Information on paid sick leave and vacation days was collected in a survey fielded in 2019.

Low-income working mothers were less likely to enjoy these advantages: they were less likely to be able to work remotely, and their jobs were less likely to offer paid sick leave or vacation days. In other words, because of the jobs they held before the pandemic, it was more difficult for low-income mothers to combine work and family responsibilities (Table 2).

Table 2

Pre-COVID job characteristics among working mothers below and above 200% of SPM poverty

	Below 200% of SPM poverty	At or above 200% of SPM poverty
Pre-COVID job could be done remotely	37%	75%
Pre-COVID job provided paid sick leave and vacation days	50%	64%

Notes: Weighted percentages among mothers who worked pre-COVID (N=572). Remote work possibility was a retrospective question asked in the first survey fielded after the pandemic began, and referred to the work the respondent did before COVID. Information on paid sick leave and vacation days was collected in a survey fielded in 2019. Poverty is measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM). Respondents not living in New York City at the time of the survey were excluded.

Returning to work

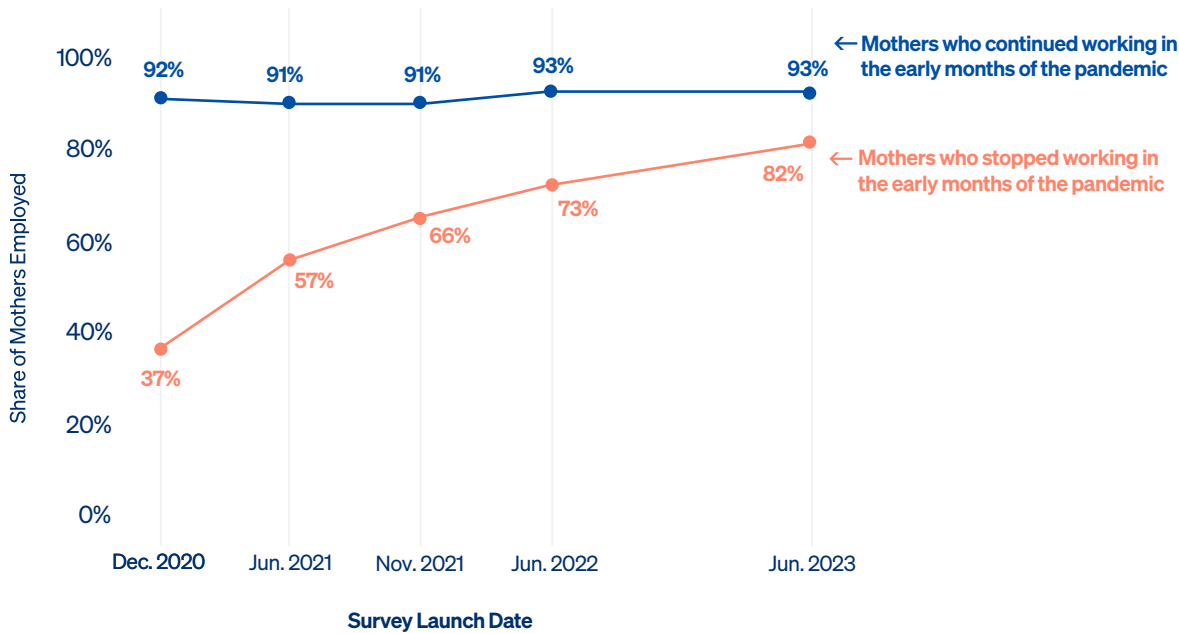
In contrast to the start of the pandemic, which had an abrupt impact on the economic life of the city, employment recovery took place gradually over the next few years. The unemployment rate in New York City peaked at 21.5% in May 2020, then dropped month by month until it reached pre-pandemic levels in the summer of 2022.⁶

For working parents, child care was critical to supporting mothers' return to work. Most in-person schooling and child care was shut down in the spring of 2020. In New York City, most public schools re-opened on a hybrid schedule during the 2020-21 school year, although schools experienced frequent closures due to COVID outbreaks among students. The New York City public schools continued to provide remote instruction to some students until the fall of 2021.⁷

After we surveyed ECPT parents in summer 2020, we conducted 5 additional surveys between 2020 and 2023. These surveys allow us to follow ECPT mothers as they returned to work. Figure 4 displays employment rates for mothers who worked pre-COVID-19, comparing mothers who stopped working after March 2020 with those who continued working during the early months of the pandemic. In our winter 2020-21 survey, fielded about 9 months after the shutdown in March 2020, about a third of the mothers who had stopped working after the outbreak were already back at work. Employment rates for this group steadily increased until our final survey in the summer of 2023.

Figure 4

Mothers' employment rates by work status after COVID-19 outbreak



Source: ECPT surveys fielded between winter 2020-21 and summer 2023; cases included in the analysis are mothers who worked pre-COVID (N=520-599). The figure displays predicted values based on a weighted logistic regression adjusting for race/ethnicity, nativity, partnered status, number of children, work limitations due to health, education, and New York City residence.

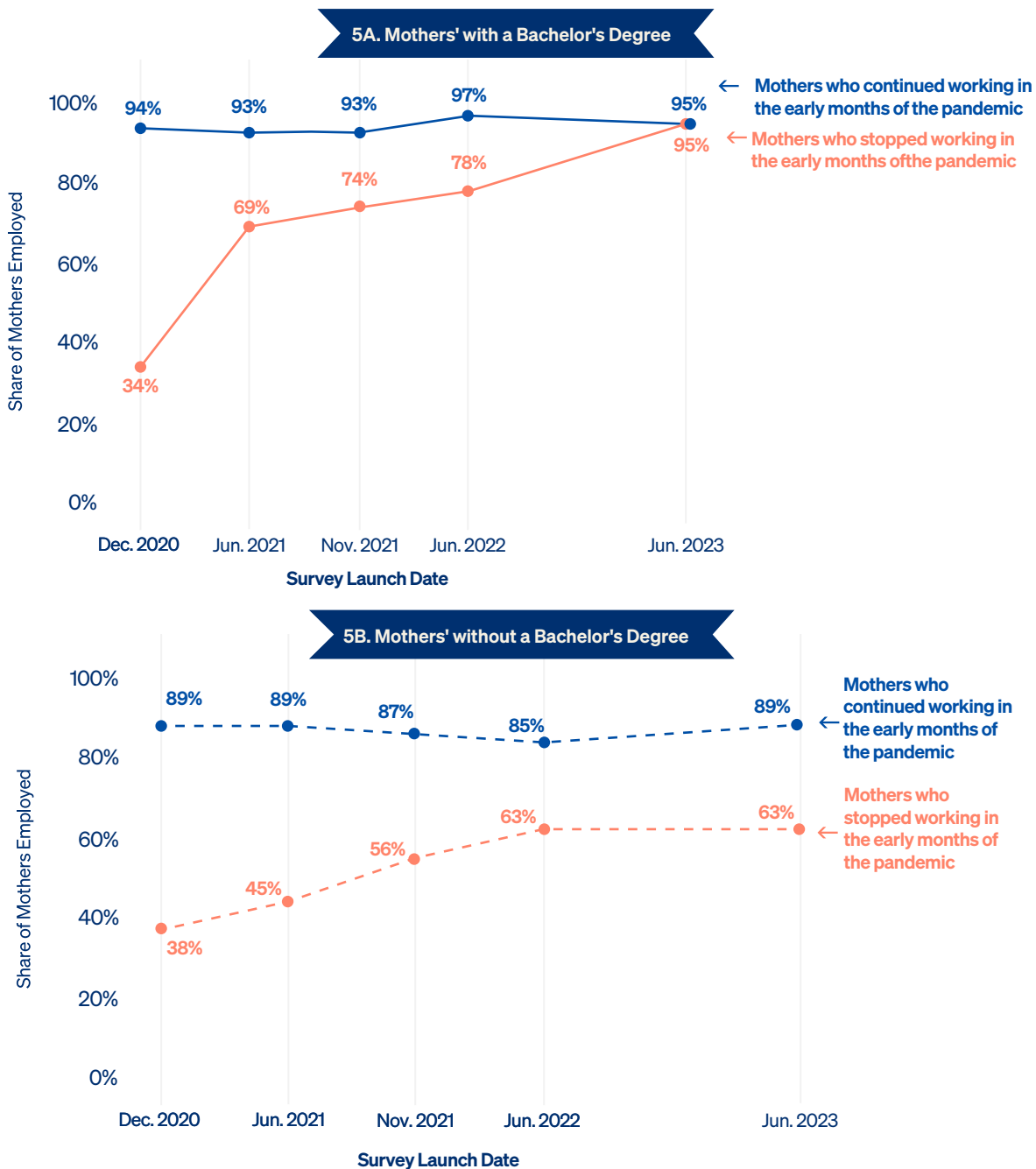
⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Local Area Unemployment Statistics – New York City."

⁷ Eliza Shapiro, "N.Y.C. Will Eliminate Remote Learning for Next School Year."

However, mothers did not all return to work at the same pace. **Among mothers who stopped working after the pandemic began, those with a college degree returned to work more quickly: by the summer of 2023, 95% of them had been re-employed (Figure 5A). By contrast, only 63% of mothers without a college degree were re-employed by that time (Figure 5B).**

Figure 5

Mothers' employment rates by education and work status after COVID-19 outbreak



Source: ECPT surveys conducted between winter 2020-21 and summer 2023; cases included in the analysis are mothers who worked pre-COVID (N=520-599). The figure displays predicted values based on a weighted logistic regression adjusting for race/ethnicity, nativity, partnered status, number of children, work limitations due to health, and New York City residence.

This pattern is consistent with other studies of COVID-era employment, which tend to find that less-educated or lower-wage workers were slower to return to work after the pandemic.⁸

Even if they were working in 2023, mothers without a college degree were less likely to work full-time and to work full-year. These differences in full-time and full-year employment meant that less-educated mothers earned less and may not have been eligible for benefits such as employer-provided health insurance (Table 3).

Table 3		
Share of employed mothers working full-time and working full-year by education, 2023		
	Without a college degree	With a college degree
Working full-time	67%	85%
Worked 12 months in past year	62%	75%

Source: ECPT survey fielded in summer 2023; cases included in the analysis are mothers who worked pre-COVID and were working in 2023 (N=465). The figure displays predicted values based on a weighted logistic regression adjusting for race/ethnicity, nativity, partnered status, number of children, work limitations due to health, and New York City residence.

⁸ Chetty, Friedman, Stepner, and Opportunity Insights Team, “The Economic Impacts of COVID-19.”

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 had a substantial impact on working mothers in New York City, with one in four mothers in the ECPT study stopping work after the March 2020 shutdown. Mothers living below 200% of the poverty line, as well as those without a college degree, were more likely to stop working; those who could do their job remotely or who had access to paid sick leave and vacation days were more likely to continue in their jobs. Of the mothers who stopped working after the COVID-19 outbreak, most resumed work by the time of our last survey in 2023. However, there was a disparity by education: 95% of college graduates but only 63% of mothers without a college degree were re-employed by that time.

While the pandemic-induced economic crisis is over, some economists caution that the pandemic could have longer-lasting implications for inequality at work. One concern is about labor market “scarring.” People with gaps in employment may lose the skills they acquired at their former jobs, or miss out on opportunities for upskilling or advancement because they are isolated from workplace networks.⁹ As we found in the ECPT data, mothers with less education were more likely to have employment gaps during and after the pandemic. As a result, non-college mothers are at higher risk of falling behind in the labor market.

There are also concerns about how the labor market itself may have changed. Hybrid and remote work are much more common than they were before the pandemic, making it easier to combine work and family responsibilities.¹⁰ However, mothers with more education are more likely to have the opportunity for remote or hybrid work, and thus to have access to the benefits of workplace flexibility.¹¹ In addition, since COVID-19, some employers have increased their use of automation, particularly in relatively routine jobs; automation may mean declining job opportunities particularly for women workers with less education.¹²

Given these concerns, post-secondary education and job training may be particularly important in the post-COVID-19 period for women who may have lost skills and opportunities during time out of the labor force and those who may be left behind by new developments in the labor market.¹³

⁹ Goldin, “Understanding the Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Women.” Albanesi and Kim, “Effects of the COVID-19 Recession on the US Labor Market.” Stevenson, “The Initial Impact of COVID-19 on Labor Market Outcomes.”

¹⁰ Pabilonia and Redmond, “The Rise in Remote Work Since the Pandemic and its Impact on Productivity.”

¹¹ Goldin, “Understanding the Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Women.”

¹² Chernoff and Warman, “COVID-19 and Implications for Automation.”

¹³ Institute for Women’s Policy Research, “Women, Automation, and the Future of Work.”

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