



*MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes, February 2021*

## **Childcare and mothers' mobility in the United States during COVID-19**

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### **Abstract**

The closure of childcare facilities and schools has resulted in the immobilization of many children in the home. As a result, some mothers are likely to experience reduced mobility as a result of the pandemic. This entry explores which mothers are most likely to experience this immobility.

### **Keywords**

pandemic, United States, mothers, women, gender, children, school, childcare

### **Theme**

Mobility Events

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By March 16, 2020, approximately 30 million children’s schools had closed for in-person instruction across the country.<sup>2,3</sup> Many schools remained closed through to the end of the school year in May or June. When the new school year started, many schools continued with remote learning,<sup>4,5</sup> while others implemented hybrid models that required part-time distance learning and part-time in-person learning.<sup>6</sup>

Because schools are funded in part by local property taxes, schools in lower-income areas generally have fewer resources than schools in wealthy areas.<sup>7,8</sup> With fewer resources, it can be more difficult for these schools to implement the public health recommendations that reduce the risks of returning to school in person.<sup>9</sup> Infrastructural improvements, such as replacing ventilation systems or decreasing classroom density with outdoor tents and extra class- and recreational rooms, may not be an option for overcrowded, under-resourced schools.<sup>10</sup> Children in families of lower socioeconomic status are therefore more likely to be learning remotely than their wealthy counterparts.<sup>11,12</sup> Consequently, we hypothesize that mothers in low- and lower-middle-income families may be disproportionately immobilized in the home as a result of the pandemic.

Job loss among low-income women may also contribute to the immobilization of women in the home, potentially to a greater extent than men. Women make up a disproportionate share of workers in the retail, hospitality, and childcare industries, which have been particularly affected by the pandemic.<sup>13</sup> Further, women of colour have seen especially high levels of unemployment during the pandemic, and are also more likely than their white counterparts to head low-income households.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Belkin, Douglas. 2020. Coronavirus Closes School for Nearly 30 Million Children in U.S. *Wall Street Journal*. Available online at: [https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-closes-school-for-nearly-30-million-children-in-u-s-11584356400?mod=article\\_inline](https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-closes-school-for-nearly-30-million-children-in-u-s-11584356400?mod=article_inline). Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Riser-Kositsky, Maya. 2020. Education Statistics: Facts About American Schools. Education Week. Available online at: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/education-statistics/index.html>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Horng, Eric and Kirsch, Jesse. 2020. Back to school: CPS releases final Fall 2020 framework for all-remote learning; CTU says ‘it’s not enough.’ *ABC7 News*. Available online at: <https://abc7chicago.com/chicago-public-schools-cps-back-to-school-remote-learning/6377546/>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Balingit, Moriah. 2020. New York City is reopening its schools for working families. But many students of color are staying home. *Washington Post*. Available online at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/09/25/nyc-schools-students-of-color/>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>6</sup> North, Anna. 2020. Hybrid school might be the worst of both worlds. *Vox*. Available online at: <https://www.vox.com/21515864/covid-hybrid-school-learning-remote-plan-pandemic>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Semuels, Alana. 2016. Good School, Rich School; Bad School, Poor School. *The Atlantic*. Available online at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/08/property-taxes-and-unequal-schools/497333/>. Last accessed 1 January 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Turner, Corey et al. 2016. Why America's Schools Have A Money Problem. *NPR*. Available online at: <https://www.npr.org/2016/04/18/474256366/why-americas-schools-have-a-money-problem>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2020. Operating schools during COVID-19: CDC’s Considerations. Available online at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/schools.html>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> North, Anna. 2020. 10 facts about school reopenings in the Covid-19 pandemic. *Vox*. Available online at: <https://www.vox.com/2020/10/1/21493602/covid-19-schools-reopening-nyc-florida-hybrid>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Gross, Betheny; Opalka, Alice; and Gundapaneni, Padma. 2020. *Getting Back to School: An Update on Plans from Across the Country*. Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington. Available online at: [https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/getting\\_back\\_to\\_school\\_brief.pdf](https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/getting_back_to_school_brief.pdf). Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>13</sup> North, Anna. The Great Recession was called a “manceession.” This one could be devastating for women. *Vox*. Available online at: <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/10/21271170/coronavirus-great-recession-2020-pandemic-women-covid>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

Of course, low-income women who remain employed are more likely to hold jobs that require in-person labour than are their wealthy counterparts.<sup>15</sup> Some cities have adopted measures that, while primarily designed to enhance students' learning experiences, are also likely to facilitate mothers' continued mobility. San Francisco, for example, has implemented a Community Hub Initiative, designed to provide supervision of small groups of low-income and minority students at community organizations as they complete lessons taught remotely by their schools.<sup>16,17</sup>

But predictions about mothers in low-income families are far from the only hypotheses one can make regarding mothers' mobility. It is also conceivable that women in dual-parent households on the high end of the income spectrum may also be immobilized in the home. Although wealthier school districts are more likely to have in-person options, it is nevertheless the case that a large share of American students are learning remotely at least part of the time.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, non-school childcare options are not widely available, even for families that can afford them.<sup>19,20</sup> With children immobilized at least part-time at home, high-income mothers may opt to immobilize themselves in the home; stereotypical gender roles—coupled with the fact that men are, on average, higher earners than women<sup>21</sup>—may lead some families to accept a new mobility arrangement as a pandemic-induced status quo.

Despite the seemingly intuitive interaction of children's and mothers' mobility, existing statistical and academic attempts to characterize the impact of COVID-19 on the experience of women have not yielded a uniform characterization of the impact of the pandemic on mothers. One recent study by the Pew Research Center suggested that the gap between mothers' and fathers' employment levels in September 2020 is comparable to that of September 2019, suggesting that the gendered impact of the pandemic might be less significant than news media commentary suggests.<sup>22</sup> Other studies, by contrast, suggest that women are falling behind men in job recovery,<sup>23</sup> that mothers are cutting back on formal work time

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<sup>15</sup> Danielson, Caroline; Tan, Daniel; and Thorman, Tess. 2020. Emergency Child Care for Essential Workers. *Public Policy Institute of California*. Available online at: <https://www.ppic.org/blog/emergency-child-care-for-essential-workers/>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Office of the Mayor. 2020. Mayor London Breed Announces Launch of Community Hubs Initiative. City and County of San Francisco. Available online at: <https://sfmayor.org/article/mayor-london-breed-announces-launch-community-hubs-initiative>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>17</sup> CBS. 2020. San Francisco Launches New Community Hubs to Provide In-Person Learning Support For Kids. *CBS San Francisco Bay Area*. Available online at: <https://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2020/09/14/san-francisco-launches-new-community-hubs-to-provide-in-person-learning-support-for-kids/>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Kamenetz, Anya. 2020. A Rising Number Of U.S. Children Have The Option Of In-Person School. *NPR*. Available online at: <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/10/22/926757172/a-rising-number-of-u-s-children-have-the-option-of-in-person-school>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Whistle, Wesley. 2020. The Nation's Child Care Crisis. *Forbes*. Available online at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wesleywhistle/2020/08/10/the-nations-child-care-crisis/?sh=4c4b49181219>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>20</sup> North, Anna. 2020. America's child care problem is an economic problem. *Vox*. Available online at: <https://www.vox.com/2020/7/16/21324192/covid-schools-reopening-daycare-child-care-coronavirus>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Graf, Nikki; Brown, Anna; and Patten, Eileen. 2019. The narrowing, but persistent, gender gap in pay. *Pew Research Center*. Available online at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/22/gender-pay-gap-facts/>. Last accessed 1 January 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Kochhar, Rakesh. 2020. Fewer mothers and fathers in U.S. are working due to COVID-19 downturn; those at work have cut hours. *Pew Research Center*. Available online at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/22/fewer-mothers-and-fathers-in-u-s-are-working-due-to-covid-19-downturn-those-at-work-have-cut-hours/>. Last accessed 28 December 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Institute for Women's Policy Research. 2020. *Women are Falling Further Behind Men in the Recovery and are 5.8 Million Jobs below pre-COVID Employment Levels, Compared with 5.0 million fewer Jobs for Men*. Available online at: <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/QF-Jobs-Day-October-dft-HM-Fact-Checked.pdf>. Last accessed 28 December 2020.

relative to fathers,<sup>24</sup> and that mothers are dropping out of the workforce and thus are not being counted among the unemployed.<sup>25</sup> If generalizable conclusions about the impact of the pandemic on mothers' (im)mobility remain elusive, we suggest that a closer look at the interaction of children's mobility and women's employment may prove fruitful.

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<sup>24</sup> Collins, Caitlyn, et al. 2020. *COVID-19 and the gender gap in work hours*. Gender, Work & Organizations. Available online at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdfdirect/10.1111/gwao.12506>. Last accessed 28 December 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Institute for Women's Policy Research. 2020.