A Growing Educational Divide in the COVID-19 Economy Is Especially Pronounced among Parents

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Abstract
Economic disruption related to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) continued through the summer of 2020, affecting the lives of millions of Americans. In this visualization, the authors use recent data from the Current Population Survey to examine Americans’ cumulative risk for labor force detachment during the pandemic. The individuals in the analysis were interviewed eight times: in April, May, June, and July of 2019 and 2020. The authors document respondents’ employment experiences during the 2020 pandemic, using the 2019 data points as a baseline for comparison. Increasing detachment from the labor force varies by basic demographic characteristics (gender and parental status), but a more important divide in the COVID-19 economy is education, an already fundamental determinant of Americans’ life chances. The educational divide is especially pronounced among parents, with important repercussions for inequalities among children.

Keywords
social class, education, family, labor market, COVID-19

Using data from the Current Population Survey (Flood et al. 2020), in this analysis we examine the cumulative risk for labor force detachment from April to July 2020 among working-aged (25–64 years) adults, with a person’s trajectory from April to July 2019 as a baseline. The sample is broken down by gender, by whether a person has minor children at home, and by whether a person has at least a bachelor’s degree. We consider the specific forms of nonemployment (formal unemployment, nonparticipation in the labor force, and employment leave or furlough), as well as reduced work hours among those who remain continuously employed. Individuals sometimes experience more than one nonemployment status during the April to July period; each nonemployment status is considered separately. Additional details about decisions we made in analyzing the data, as well as some additional findings, are included in the supplementary file.

Research on employment experiences in the initial month of the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic (Collins et al. 2020; Landivar et al. 2020) documented the importance of gender and parenthood. Our findings (Figure 1) focus on the cumulative risk for labor force detachment over several months and highlight the extreme importance of considering education, especially among parents.

Findings

Formal Unemployment
The most important driver of increasing nonemployment during the pandemic has been formal unemployment. For every demographic group, having low education has increased the unemployment toll the pandemic has taken by about twice or more. Less educated fathers have experienced the sharpest increase in the cumulative risk for unemployment, almost 2.5 times larger than the increase among highly educated fathers. Similarly, among mothers, the increase in the risk for unemployment is more than twice as large among the less educated as among the highly educated.

Nonparticipation in the Labor Force
We might predict that parents would be particularly vulnerable to dropping out of the labor force during a time when

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childcare has been scarce and schools have been closed. However, nonparticipation can also be a hidden form of unemployment for discouraged workers, particularly in a slack economy. Parents do not appear to have experienced larger increases in nonparticipation than nonparents. Perhaps this is because growing discouragement among unemployed workers has outweighed supply-side decreases in participation. As with unemployment, the educational divide in nonparticipation is striking, especially among parents.

**Employment Leave and Furlough**

An individual who still has a job has the hope of returning to it in the not too distant future. However, during an economic...
downturn, leave or furlough may be a transition to unemployment, and even if a person does eventually return to his or her job, time away may have negative effects on work experience and earnings. The largest increases in leave and furlough are among less educated groups. Highly educated women, especially mothers, actually had somewhat lower risk for leave or furlough in 2020 than they did in 2019. One potential explanation is that they may have been less likely to take advantage of voluntary parental or other leave policies during difficult economic times.

Work Hours

The last panel, work hours, includes only those who were continuously employed across all observations in both years and whose increasing labor force detachment is therefore not represented in the other panels. Hours are averaged across a person’s April to July observations in 2019 and 2020, respectively. We see at least small declines in hours among every group. Mothers’ increasing labor force detachment during the pandemic is accounted for mostly by changes in employment status; among those mothers who remained continuously employed, hours changed less than for other groups. The largest change in hours is among less educated men, especially among less educated fathers.

Discussion

The current pandemic has exacerbated many forms of inequality. An educational divide in Americans’ life chances, already large before the pandemic (Putnam 2016), seems likely to grow even larger as economic disruption hits less educated workers far harder than others. Troublingly, this educational divide in adults’ employment experiences has widened especially among parents, contributing further to the “diverging destinies” of children that have been decades in the making (McLanahan 2004).

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Author Biographies

Christel Kesler is an associate professor of sociology at Colby College. She also currently serves as the faculty associate director of Colby’s Goldfarb Center for Public Affairs. Her research focuses broadly on issues of inequality and social policy across advanced democracies, with a particular emphasis in much of her work on patterns and processes of immigrant incorporation. This data visualization grew out of a larger project about racial, ethnic, and social class variation in work-family reconciliation. Earlier work from the project has been published in Socius (“Gender Norms, Work-Family Policies, and Labor Force Participation among Immigrant and Native-Born Women in Western Europe,” 2018) and in Social Science Research (“Maternal Employment When Children Are in Preschool: Variations by Race, Ethnicity, and Nativity,” 2020).

Sarah Bash is a senior undergraduate student at Colby College. She is majoring in physics and philosophy, with a focus on social philosophy. She is currently writing a thesis on the ways in which reproductive norms influence social conceptions of femininity, shift public discourse away from constraints that limit many women’s reproductive “choice,” and portray parenthood as the only worthwhile source of fulfillment in life.