A Recipe for Madness: Parenthood in the Era of Covid-19

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Objectives. This article seeks to understand the economic, mental health, and political impacts on American parents in the era of Covid-19. Methods. We draw on survey data from a diverse national sample collected in September 2020 and employ multivariate analysis to explore how Covid-19 has uniquely affected the attitudes and life experiences of American parents. Results. We find that Covid-19 has been unusually burdensome for parents as they are more likely to have experienced negative physical and mental health outcomes and suffer more negative financial impacts. Despite the challenges parents face, they also remain cautious about in-person school and vaccinations. Although mothers have been the focus of much news coverage, we find that both mothers and fathers have been similarly and negatively impacted by Covid-19. Conclusion. American parents are suffering at distinctively high levels during this pandemic. In order to recover, policymakers will need to target outreach and support tailored to the needs and issues facing parents.

The global Covid-19 pandemic has reshaped American political and social life in a myriad of ways. While almost everyone’s lives have been negatively impacted by the pandemic, some of the most profound and sustained changes have been those endured by parents—the 64 million Americans living with children under the age of 18 (Cox and Abrams, 2020). Parents have to negotiate their own workplace demands and other responsibilities with around-the-clock childcare responsibilities, spending hours every day helping their children navigate remote and hybrid schooling, and performing even more household tasks (e.g., preparing multiple meals a day, more cleaning since everyone is at home). This increased workload has fallen disproportionately on working mothers, although the amount of childcare and household tasks assumed by fathers has also increased meaningfully (Cox and Abrams, 2020; Craig and Churchill, 2020; Miller, 2020). Parents have also had to balance deep concerns about their family’s safety with their desire for their kids to have a high-quality in-person education.

Even during normal, nonpandemic times, becoming a parent dramatically affects the lives of men and women—introducing salient new social roles, altered social networks, busier schedules, tighter finances, more worries, less sleep—and of course, the unquantifiable joys and rewards of having and raising a child (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie, 2006; Gallagher and Gerstel, 2001; Munch, McPherson, and Smith-Lovin, 1997; Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003; Senior, 2014). Research has shown that the sustained and significant changes brought about by parenthood act as a meaningful adult political socialization
experience and that parenthood is associated with distinctive political and social outlooks on a number of policy issues. Particularly on social welfare policy issues, the effects of parenthood are both significant and gendered, reflecting the distinctive roles of women and men in child rearing (e.g., Elder and Greene, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2018).

This research project investigates how American parents are faring during the Covid-19 pandemic and how being a parent correlates with attitudes on issues relating to the pandemic, including those directly related to children, such as what type of schooling they believe is the best, to broader issues such as level of concern about Covid and willingness to take a Covid vaccine. Using data from a diverse national sample and a survey featuring a wide variety of questions on Coronavirus impacts, concerns, and attitudes, this study provides one of the first empirically rigorous pictures of how the pandemic is uniquely affecting America’s parents and their political attitudes.

Our results provide empirical support for what many intuitively suspect; parents have been distinctively and negatively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Although gender remains a significant factor on many issues, we find that both mothers and fathers have suffered similarly and disproportionately during the pandemic. We also find that even after robust controls, parenthood is associated with distinctive attitudes about several Covid-19-related issues. The results further confirm the important role of having and raising children in shaping the political attitudes of both men and women. Moreover, the results hold significance for policymakers. American parents are suffering at distinctively high levels during this pandemic. In order to recover from the devastation of the pandemic, policymakers will need to target outreach and support tailored to the needs and issues facing parents.

Parenthood as an Agent of Political Socialization

Until recently, scholars of public opinion had not spent much time exploring parenthood as an agent of political socialization. This is surprising given the profound and long-term ways parenting affects the lives of women and men, and the ways that parenthood, and motherhood in particular, has been politicized in the United States by the news media and the Republican and Democratic Parties (Elder and Greene, 2006, 2012; Greenlee, 2014). Recent research shows that the experience of raising children clearly has political implications for attitude formation. Parenthood is associated with distinctive attitudes on a range of policy issues, not just those directly related to child rearing, and it does so in both the United States and European context (Banducci et al., 2016; Elder and Greene, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2018; Greenlee, 2014; Howell and Day, 2000).

On some policy issues, being a parent, regardless of gender, is associated with distinctive attitudes. This is the case on policy issues of direct relevance to children. For example, Elder and Greene (2016, 2019) found that both motherhood and fatherhood predicted more liberal attitudes when it came to government spending on day care and education. Having children also appears to correlate with heightened fears and concerns. In their study exploring attitudes about GMOs, Elder, Greene, and Lizotte (2018) find that being a parent is associated with greater concerns about GMOs regardless of gender. This suggests that raising a child leads to heightened anxieties about the safety of children for both mothers and fathers. Klar, Madonia, and Schneider (2014) found that threatening appeals directed at parents actually exerted a greater influence on men’s policy preferences compared to women. Their explanation is that parenthood always shapes the attitudes of women in a profound way, hence minimizing mothers’ reaction to parental priming,
whereas parenthoods’ influence on men’s views is more contextually dependent and open to being affected by new information.

Other studies show that the effects of parenting on political attitudes are different for women and men, reflecting the gendered nature of contemporary parenthood (Banducci et al., 2016; Elder and Greene, 2006, 2008, 2012). Over the last half century, women have moved into the workforce in large numbers yet they remain the primary nurturers and caregivers for their children. Despite working outside the home, most contemporary mothers are spending as much or more quality time with their children than mothers of past generations (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2013; St. George, 2007). Contemporary fathers are also spending more quality time with their children and engaging in more nurturing activities than fathers of previous generations, yet women still spend about twice as much time with their children than fathers do (Dick, 2011; Miller, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2013:6). While men express intentions to be more involved fathers before having children, they often revert to more traditional roles once they actually become parents (Miller, 2010).

Recent academic research shows that parenthood shapes the attitudes of women and men in ways consistent with these gendered parental roles. The intense nurturing and juggling act of contemporary motherhood seems to encourage women to view a robust social welfare state as an ally, especially as government social welfare programs take on many of the nurturing activities traditionally assumed by women and mothers (Banducci et al., 2016; Elder and Greene, 2012, 2014, 2018; Howell and Day, 2000). Studies exploring the impact of fatherhood on men have yielded less consistent results, perhaps reflecting the evolving role of fathers discussed above.

**Public Opinion on Covid-19**

Pew Research and Gallup, among other reputable polling organizations, have conducted a number of national surveys that capture attitudes about Covid-19 providing insights into Americans’ views on the pandemic and how they have been evolving. These surveys show several consistent findings. First, partisanship is highly related to attitudes about the Coronavirus, and this relationship has grown stronger as the pandemic drags on (Newport, 2020; Pew, 2020). Essentially every question asked about Coronavirus reveals a significant partisan divide, with Democrats expressing more concern and more fear about the virus, Democrats indicating that they are taking more precautionary measures, and Democrats more supportive of government efforts to respond to the virus compared to Republicans.

Polls and research studies have also shown that there is a significant gender gap on issues relating to Covid-19 with women expressing greater levels of concern than men (Brooks and Saad, 2020). Relative to women, men are less concerned about Covid and take fewer precautionary measures, even though studies show men have a higher fatality rate from Covid than women (Reeves and Ford, 2020). Men’s lower levels of concern is consistent with other research showing that men, especially white men, are more risk acceptant than women and people of color (Elder and Greene, 2019).

Turning to parents specifically, a survey conducted by the American Enterprise Institute during summer 2020 concluded that American parents were suffering considerably as a result of the increased demands on them during the pandemic. Basic bivariate analyses presented in this report showed that parents expressed greater worries about the Coronavirus than nonparents, and that mothers expressed more worries than fathers (Cox and Abrams,
Parents overall and mothers in particular reported being more overwhelmed, depressed, and frustrated (Cox and Abrams, 2020).

Other polls have looked at parents’ views on schools and day care. The results suggest that parents have complicated feelings about the best approach to schooling during the pandemic. Although parents are clearly overwhelmed, they have serious concerns about sending their children to day care and to school. A Gallup poll conducted in September 2020 found that 45 percent of parents with children aged 0–18 were very worried that their child would get the Coronavirus at their school or day care (Marken and Harlan, 2020).

This study builds on our understandings of parenthood and Covid-19 in several important ways. First, this study is based on a demographically diverse national sample and uses multivariate analysis to understand the degree to which it is parenthood per se, and not potential confounds, are responsible for the unique perspectives and experiences of parents. Second, this study employs a distinctly broad range of Coronavirus-related questions, providing an opportunity to get a comprehensive understanding of attitudes on these issues. By employing a robust set of controls, we are able to assess the various influences on Coronavirus attitudes so that we can untangle the effects of partisanship, gender, and parenthood among other important factors. Third, this study goes beyond the surveys and reports published as it is able to place the empirical findings within the broader literature about parenthood, politics, and public opinion. Finally, this study is valuable because it is able to shed insights into these important issues in a timely manner, while the pandemic is ongoing and while policymakers are considering the best responses.

Parenthood During the Era of Covid-19: Expectations

Given prior research on the political effects of parenthood, as well as the ways the lives of parents have been changed by the Coronavirus, we have several related expectations. We expect parents overall to express more fear about Covid-19 relative to their nonparent peers and that this relationship will remain significant even after partisanship, gender, and other controls are included in models. Even though children are at lower risk for getting seriously ill from Covid, prior research (Elder, Greene, and Lizotte, 2018) suggests raising children heightens parents’ anxieties about potential dangers. Given that parents are not only concerned about their own safety, so that they can be healthy and take care of their children, but for the health and safety of their children, we expect parents to express distinctly high levels of fear about the Coronavirus.

We also anticipate that the economic toll on parents will be disproportionately negative given the precarious nature of the challenges parents are facing—trying to balance work with dramatically increased childcare responsibilities. We anticipate that parents are more likely than others to report that the pandemic has negatively impact their overall economic well-being as well as their personal employment status.

Given the challenges facing parents during the pandemic—trying to balance caring for children with their employment and other obligations while also being deeply concerned about the safety of their families—we also expect to find evidence that the pandemic has had a distinctly negative impact on the mental health of parents. We expect parents to report being more stressed, anxious, and depressed than their nonparent peers. While we anticipate that parenthood will predict negative mental health impacts across the board, we also expect to find that this is particularly the case for mothers who are carrying greater responsibilities relative to fathers in terms of caregiving, assisting children with school
work, and household responsibilities (Cox and Abrams, 2020; Cohen and Hsu, 2020; Miller, 2020).

We are also interested in exploring parents’ views on Coronavirus-related policy issues including vaccines and schooling even though we do not have clear predictions about the direction of parenthood impacts on these issues. While parents are very focused on keeping their children and families safe, which a vaccine should hopefully do, it may also be that concerns about a vaccine developed at record speed creates fears about possible negative health effects from the vaccine. Our expectations concerning parenthood and views on school during the pandemic are also mixed. Given the conflicting needs of parents—both to have their children get a high-quality in-person education with their desire to keep their children safe—parenthood may shape attitudes about school in conflicting ways. Nevertheless, understanding whether parents have distinctive views on vaccines and pandemic schooling compared to those without children is important to understand, given that parents are the ones who will be making decisions for their families on these issues.

**Methods**

**Data**

Respondents were a nationally diverse quota-based sample \( (N = 2,400) \) of Americans recruited by Qualtrics, which sought to match Census benchmarks for age, race, gender, and education (Hetherington, Aziz, and Cassario, 2020). The survey was the third wave of a multiwave, multi-investigator project focused on political developments surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. Forty-six percent of respondents had participated in a prior survey wave, and the rest had not. Wave 3 was in the field from September 8–29, 2020, and included unrelated questions used for other studies.

**Dependent Variables.** We sought to take advantage of this rich data set by exploring a variety of Covid-related scales and items in relation to parenthood. First, we employ a Covid-perceived threat scale, which includes a number of questions designed to understand how threatened, from not at all to a great deal, respondents feel about Coronavirus including how personally threatening respondents find Covid-19 on a day-to-day basis, how threatening they feel Coronavirus is to their community, to American democracy, their own financial situation, and to the U.S. economy. The questions were combined into a single scale, higher scores indicated greater feelings of threat. Cronbach's alpha for this scale is 0.87. This and all subsequent scales were rescaled from 0 to 1 for ease of comparison across a variety of measures. Question wording for all items can be found in the Appendix.

This survey also allowed us to explore arguably the most direct impact of Covid, whether the respondent has contracted Covid. We code individuals who have had a confirmed case of Covid as 1, those who think they had Covid, but did not have a confirmed diagnosis as .5, and those who did not have Covid as 0.\(^1\)

We employ a mental health scale to measure the psychological impact of the pandemic. The mental health scale included several items including: respondent’s assessment of how much worry or stress related to the Coronavirus has negatively impacted their mental

\(^1\)An alternate specification where suspected, but not confirmed, Covid cases are omitted has no substantive impact on any of our analyses.
health; how often respondent feels lack of interest in doing things, feels down or hopeless, feels anxious or on edge, and feels uncontrollable worry. Higher scores indicate more negative mental health self-assessments. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale is 0.92.

The third set of dependent variables attempted to capture various economic impacts. The first is a dichotomous item asking whether it is more important for the government to “contain the health threat of the Coronavirus” coded 0 or to “manage the economic pain caused by the Coronavirus” coded 1. The next item asks about the family’s financial situation over the past year and runs from 0 improved to 1 became worse. The final economic variable is scored 1 if the respondent lost their job due to Covid, 0 otherwise.

Though Covid vaccines were still in the trial phase at the time of the survey, the extensive news coverage and focus on vaccines as a way to end the pandemic called for inclusion of vaccine items in the survey. Most prominently, we assess an item on whether the respondent intends to get a vaccine once they are available, scored 0 for not planning to get the vaccine, 0.5 for unsure, and 1 for planning on vaccination. We also included an item on mandatory vaccination, “If a vaccine against Coronavirus is developed and testing shows it to be safe and effective, should everyone be required to get vaccinated?” scored from 0 to strongly oppose mandatory vaccination to 1, strongly favor.

Finally, the survey included two items to address school concerns during the pandemic, especially noteworthy as the academic year had just started when this survey was in the field. The first asked of schools in one’s community, “how confident are you that school officials will take appropriate precautions to limit the spread of the Coronavirus?” The four-item response categories were recoded from 0, not all confident, to 1, very confident. The final item queried what type of schooling they believe their school district should be offering—all remote, 0; hybrid, 0.5; or all in-person, 1.

Independent Variables. Our primary independent variable was parenthood. Respondents were coded as parents if they were parent or guardian to children under 18 in their home. Additionally, given the strong theoretical and empirical reasons to think women and men were experiencing parenting during the pandemic differently, we perform analyses separately for women with children (mothers), women without children, men with children (fathers), and men without children.

Our analyses include a number of regression models in which we control for possible confounds in attempt to assess the independent impact of parenthood on these dependent variables. The controls include gender (female = 1), race (nonwhite = 1), education (college degree = 1), income (12 categories, rescaled from 0 to 1), religion (born again = 1), age (9 age categories, rescaled from 0 to 1), the standard 7-point party identification measure (rescaled from 0 to 1, higher values are Republican), and a 5-point liberal/conservative ideology measure (rescaled from 0 to 1, higher values are conservative).

Analyses

We begin with bivariate comparisons of parents and nonparents, as well as mothers and fathers, on each of our dependent variables (Tables 1 and 2, Figure 1). Following the bivariate comparisons, we run regression models, with the full range of controls listed above, in order to assess not just whether parents and non-parents have been experiencing Covid differently, but also the degree to which, given the many potential confounds with parenthood, we can attribute these differences to parenthood itself, rather than one of its
TABLE 1
Parents versus Nonparents and Covid

|                     | Parent | Non-parent |
|---------------------|--------|------------|
| Covid threat        | 0.64   | 0.61       |
| Contracted Covid    | 0.11   | 0.05       |
| Mental health       | 0.30   | 0.20       |
| Will get vaccinated | 0.66   | 0.78       |
| Mandatory vaccination | 0.54  | 0.58       |
| Mode of school      | 0.32   | 0.37       |
| Confidence in school safety | 0.61  | 0.58       |
| Health vs. economy  | 0.46   | 0.33       |
| Family financial situation | 0.41  | 0.44       |
| Lost job due to Covid | 0.14  | 0.09       |

NOTE: All variables were scaled from 0 to 1. Higher values indicate greater perceived threat, contracted Covid, more mental health issues, intent to get vaccinated, support for mandatory vaccination, support for in-person school, confidence in school safety, preference for focus on economy, improved financial situation, and lost job due to Covid. Bold cells indicate difference at $p < 0.05$.

TABLE 2
Parenthood, Gender, and Covid

|                     | Mothers | Women Without Children | Dads | Men Without Children |
|---------------------|---------|------------------------|------|----------------------|
| Covid threat        | 0.65    | 0.64                   | 0.63 | 0.59                 |
| Had Covid           | 0.09    | 0.05                   | 0.14 | 0.05                 |
| Mental health       | 0.32    | 0.21                   | 0.29 | 0.19                 |
| Will get vaccinated | 0.55    | 0.73                   | 0.75 | 0.82                 |
| Mandatory vaccination | 0.50  | 0.56                   | 0.58 | 0.60                 |
| Mode of school      | 0.29    | 0.34                   | 0.35 | 0.40                 |
| Confidence in school safety | 0.58  | 0.58                   | 0.63 | 0.58                 |
| Health vs. economy  | 0.45    | 0.31                   | 0.46 | 0.36                 |
| Family financial situation | 0.38  | 0.43                   | 0.44 | 0.46                 |
| Lost job due to Covid | 0.16  | 0.08                   | 0.13 | 0.10                 |

NOTE: All variables were scaled from 0 to 1. Higher values indicate greater perceived threat, contracted Covid, more mental health issues, intent to get vaccinated, support for mandatory vaccination, support for in-person school, confidence in school safety, preference for focus on economy over health, improved financial situation, and lost job due to Covid. Bold cells indicate difference within gender (e.g., mothers compared to childfree women) at $p < 0.05$. Italic cells indicate significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between mothers and dads. Difference within gender at $p < 0.05$.

covariates. We estimate these models as OLS, binary logit, and ordered logit, depending on the particular dependent variable, and the results are displayed in Tables 3 and 4.

Results

Table 1 presents bivariate comparisons and reveals that there are statistically significant differences between parents and nonparents on almost all of our dependent variables. Perhaps most notable is the greater threat from Covid that parents experience as well as the
clear, deleterious impact on mental health. The relative financial hit to parents is also very real—with parents much more likely to have lost their job due to Covid and more likely to report a declining family financial situation. Perhaps for these reasons, it should not be surprising that parents also are more likely to believe that society needs to put more emphasis on the economy, than on health. Interestingly, parents are also less likely to intend to get vaccinated. In fact, parents seem to be more vaccine-skeptical, in general, as they are also more likely to oppose mandatory Covid vaccinations.

When it comes to schools, parents present an interesting contrast. Parents, who presumably know school officials best, actually have the most confidence in how those officials will deal with Covid. Nonetheless, compared to their nonparent peers, they favor the more health-conservative approach of online learning more so than in-person learning.

Given concerns that the challenges of parenting during the pandemic may be especially steep for mothers, Table 2 presents a series of comparisons for parents and nonparents broken down by gender. Figure 1 presents this same information in graphical form, to more readily reveal patterns across variables. This set of results largely suggests that the effects of Covid on parenthood are substantial for both men and women and in similar ways. For example, both mothers and fathers report having had Covid and experiencing more negative mental health outcomes compared to their nonparent peers, and both mothers and fathers prefer online school and express vaccine reluctance at higher levels compared to their nonparent peers. While not all the parent versus nonparent differences are statistically significant when restricted within genders, there is not a single case where the direction of the parenthood effect is different for men and women suggesting that the ways parenting during the pandemic is affecting women and men are largely similar.

That said, gender is still an important factor in understanding the impacts of Covid-19. The italicized results in Table 2 indicate statistically significant differences between mothers and fathers. For example, even though both mothers and fathers report that Covid has negatively impacted their economic position more so than nonparents, mothers are
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TABLE 3
Regression Models of Covid and Vaccine Perceptions

|                      | Threat\(^a\) | Had Covid\(^c\) | Mental Health\(^b\) | Vaccine Intent\(^b\) | Mandatory Vaccine\(^c\) |
|----------------------|--------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Constant/cut 1       | 0.686**      | 1.131**         | 0.473**              | −2.060**              | −1.191**                |
|                      | (0.017)      | (0.257)         | (0.020)              | (0.170)               | (0.157)                 |
| Cut 2                | 2.247        | 0.005           | −0.639**             | −0.151                |                          |
|                      | (0.270)      | (0.111)         | (0.164)              | (0.155)               |                         |
| Female               | 0.026**      | −0.160          | 0.005                | −0.616**              | −0.329**                |
|                      | (0.009)      | (0.150)         | (0.011)              | (0.090)               | (0.085)                 |
| Nonwhite             | 0.035**      | −0.459**        | −0.039**             | −0.312**              | 0.020                   |
|                      | (0.010)      | (0.165)         | (0.012)              | (0.096)               | (0.091)                 |
| Born again           | 0.011        | 0.802**         | 0.011                | −0.299**              | −0.267**                |
|                      | (0.011)      | (0.162)         | (0.013)              | (0.100)               | (0.098)                 |
| College degree       | 0.000        | 0.032           | −0.008               | 0.314**               | 0.095                   |
|                      | (0.011)      | (0.178)         | (0.013)              | (0.105)               | (0.100)                 |
| Income               | −0.050**     | 0.302           | −0.121**             | 0.389*                | 0.210                   |
|                      | (0.016)      | (0.268)         | (0.019)              | (0.154)               | (0.148)                 |
| Age                  | 0.010        | −2.572**        | −0.302**             | 0.878**               | 0.834**                 |
|                      | (0.022)      | (0.399)         | (0.026)              | (0.211)               | (0.203)                 |
| Party ID             | −0.131**     | −0.367          | −0.020**             | −0.616**              | −0.877**                |
|                      | (0.016)      | (0.247)         | (0.019)              | (0.150)               | (0.144)                 |
| Ideology             | −0.047*      | −0.240          | −0.086**             | −0.605**              | −0.554**                |
|                      | (0.021)      | (0.319)         | (0.025)              | (0.199)               | (0.191)                 |
| Parent               | 0.034**      | 0.617**         | 0.065**              | −0.186                | 0.046                   |
|                      | (0.011)      | (0.154)         | (0.013)              | (0.106)               | (0.102)                 |
| Number               | 2.119        | 2.120           | 2.118                | 2.115                 | 2.118                   |
| (Pseudo) \(R^2\)    | 0.11         | 0.07            | 0.14                 | 0.05                  | 0.09                    |

\(^a\) OLS.  
\(^b\) Binary logit.  
\(^c\) Ordered logit.  

NOTE  
\(^*\) \(p < 0.05\)  
\(^{**}\) \(p < 0.01\).

more likely, compared to fathers, to report that their family’s economic position has been negatively impacted by Covid. Mothers are also more likely, relative to fathers, to offer vaccine skepticism and to prefer remote school. Even though both mothers and fathers report contracting Covid at higher rates compared to nonparents, fathers are more likely to report getting Covid than mothers. Important to note is that in most cases where moms and dads are significantly distinct from one another there is also a statistically significant gender gap. There is only one case where that is not that case and that is mothers’ greater
hesitance toward vaccines; mothers are less likely than fathers and women without children to express intent to get vaccinated and to think vaccinations should be mandatory.

The differences shown in the bivariate comparisons between parents and nonparents, as well as mothers and fathers, reflect very real, lived, differences between how parents and nonparents have been experiencing Covid. In short, Covid is having a substantially greater
negative impact on the physical health, emotional health, and financial health of parents. Parents, especially mothers, also express more vaccine hesitancy, which is significant given the large role mothers play in the health-care decisions for their children (Elder and Greene, 2008) and the reality that children, as well as adults, must be vaccinated in order for American society to reach herd immunity. But the bivariate analyses alone cannot provide clear insight into how parenthood itself (i.e., most notably given the strong confound with age) is likely shaping these experiences and we thus turn to the results from our multivariate analyses.

Our multivariate results, presented in Tables 3 and 4, strongly suggest that actually being a parent, rather than other related demographic factors, can account for much of the differential impacts of Covid. Turning first to Table 3, we find that being a parent is significantly associated with perceiving Covid as a greater threat, even when controlling for other demographics and importantly partisanship. This finding is consistent with the idea that the act of caring for a child or children intensifies fears about possible threats, including the Coronavirus. This finding is similar to the findings of Elder, Greene, and Lizotte (2018) showing that parents are more fearful of GMOs. In brief, the Covid-19 era has been a fearful time for all Americans, but presumably out of a desire to protect their families, parents are particularly and uniquely fearful.

Relatedly, we find strong evidence that parenthood is significantly correlated with negative mental health outcomes. Parents are significantly more likely to report having recently experienced intense worry, anxiety, and depression. Even under normal circumstances, parenting is an intense experience associated with new worries but also new joys; yet studies examining the mental health impacts of parents during nonpandemic times do not show consistently higher or lower levels of anxiety and depression among parents than nonparents (Evenson and Simon, 2005; Rimhau and Wallander, 2010; Ross, Mirowsky, and Goldsteen, 1990). In contrast, Table 3 reveals that parents are much more likely to report negative mental health outcomes, and these parenthood findings are robust and significant even when partisanship, gender, race, income, and other potentially confounding variables are controlled. These results provide compelling evidence that parents are disproportionately suffering from anxiety, worry, and other negative health outcomes during the pandemic.

In terms of actually experiencing a case of Covid-19, Table 3 indicates that being a parent is significant and positive, even in multivariate analyses. This means that parenthood again appears to play a meaningful role, with parents much more likely to have contracted Covid than nonparents, even with controls. Why exactly this is the case is a difficult epidemiological, rather than social science question, however, it certainly seems plausible that the demands of parenthood are directly placing parents into more risk. Parents have to work in order to support themselves and their families and for a majority of parents this means working outside the home. Despite entreaties from some public health experts to keep contacts limited to those in your household, parents who must work outside the home have no choice but to rely on others to care for their children—whether this means sending their children to a day care, school, paying a caregiver, or relying on friends and family. Both working outside the home and relying on others for childcare exposes parents to higher levels of risk.

The results in Table 4 show parents to be distinctive in reporting that Coronavirus has had a negative impact on their financial situation. Parents are more likely than nonparents to report having lost their jobs due to Covid and to have experienced a worsened financial situation over the past year. While much of the media attention has focused on the challenges of child rearing, in particular, which are very real, it also appears that these
challenges are exacerbated even further by more difficult financial and employment circumstances.

When it comes to vaccinations, also shown in Table 4, it does not appear that parenthood itself is having direct impact, as the strong bivariate relationship is no longer significant in the regression models. In regression models without age, parenthood does show up as a strong predictor, and then loses its significant effect once age is added, strongly suggesting that in the bivariate case that parenthood is acting as a proxy for age. Older Americans are significantly more likely than young Americans to express an intention to get the Coronavirus vaccine and to think the vaccination should be required. Once age is controlled for, parents no longer offer distinctive views on these issues. That said, given that parents are a distinctively younger group of Americans and, as a result, are more wary of the vaccine, and that parents also hold decision-making power over their own and their children’s vaccinations, it is important for public health officials and policymakers to design tailored outreach to America’s parents surrounding the vaccine.

Finally, the somewhat contrasting views of parents concerning school revealed in the bivariate tables hold up in the multivariate analyses. Parenthood remains a predictor of having more confidence in how school officials will deal with Covid even with controls. Additionally, the multivariate results show that being a parent predicts greater support for the more health-conservative approach of online learning. These results underscore the dilemma facing parents—they are under tremendous strain economically and psychologically—but they do not see a return to in-person school as the solution. Parents are in many ways in an impossible situation with no good solutions (Bennett, 2021).

We turn now to the role of gender in shaping the experiences and attitudes of parents during the pandemic. Given that mothers regularly take on more childcare responsibilities than fathers, and that the workload of mothers has increased even more during the pandemic, we expected that mothers would be particularly fearful of the Coronavirus and would be more likely than fathers to report negative mental health outcomes. This expectation was not supported in our results. The results reveal a parenthood effect, but not one that differs by gender. Although not shown here, we ran every regression model presented with a gender–parent interaction term and in every single case the motherhood interaction was not significant. In short, we find no evidence that, with regards to parenthood, Covid effects mothers and fathers in substantively different ways. One reason for these surprising results is likely that fathers, as well as mothers, have significantly increased their childcare and household workload during the pandemic. One recent study found that even though mothers continue to do more than fathers, that the relative change in workload from prepandemic to pandemic was even greater for fathers (Craig and Churchill, 2020). Given this, it is not all that surprising that fathers, as well as mothers, are experiencing greater mental strain.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Covid-19 global pandemic has negatively impacted the lives of almost all Americans. The results of this study reveal a striking picture of the ways that the pandemic has had disproportionately harmful impacts on parents. The mental health of parents, based on their own self-reports, has been highly and negatively impacted by the pandemic. While the survey results cannot make any claims about the causes of the findings, it is likely that parents’ dramatically increased workload during the pandemic is driving these results. Our results also show that parents report, more than others, that the pandemic has negatively
affected their economic position—a reality that undoubtedly causes greater stress. Parents are also more likely to have contracted Covid-19. Despite parents’ desperate need for time to do their jobs and help caring for their children, they do not see in-person school as a safe option. There are, quite simply, no good options for parents. In order for America’s families to recover from the pandemic it will be critical for policymakers to address the economic and health needs of parents, and to demonstrate to them that in-person school can be done safely. While mothers have done a greater share of childcare work for decades, a gender inequality that must be addressed, our research also shows the need for pandemic recovery policies to be targeted at helping both mothers and fathers, as both moms and dads are engaged in the exhausting, high wire act of parenting during the pandemic.

While these results paint a compelling portrait of the difficulties of parenting during the Covid-19 pandemic, it should also be noted that they do represent a snapshot in time of September 2020. If anything, that period of time may have underestimated parents’ struggles and fears. It represented the beginning of the school year when most parents held out hope that an end to the madness of working while also homeschooling and caring for their children 24/7 was around the corner, as policymakers figured out how to orchestrate a safe return to in-person schooling and day-care for their children. That, however, has not happened for most parents. It also represented a time period where Covid-19 cases where at a relative lull. Since September 2020, parents have had to continue with many more months of remote learning, social distancing, work and childcare balancing, and fading hope for any type of meaningful assistance. It is hard to say what the full brunt of the psychological and economic toll on parents will be, but it is likely the results presented here, if anything, underestimate that toll.

As we continue to monitor and explore the impacts of the pandemic on Americans and American public opinion, we should likewise continue to seek to understand the unique impact on parents and how this may evolve as the pandemic and our responses to it do so. For example, public opinion toward Covid-19 vaccines has already been shown to be quite dynamic (Brennan, 2020) and we might well expect the relationship between parenthood and vaccine attitudes to evolve over the vaccine rollout. At this time, however, policymakers would do well to take note of the significantly higher levels of reluctance among parents, especially mothers, to get the vaccine or make it mandatory. Experts suggest that our nation cannot begin to return to the new normal until 80 percent or more of the population has been vaccinated, a figure that cannot be reached without robust levels of vaccinations among both parents and children.

Appendix

Survey Items/Response Coding

Covid threat: On a scale from 1, not at all, to 10, a great deal, how much of a threat do you think the Coronavirus presents to: your daily life, your community, American democracy, your personal financial situation, the U.S. Economy?

Had Covid: To your knowledge, have you been infected with the Coronavirus/Covid-19? Response categories: no, to my knowledge I have not been infected with Coronavirus/Covid-19 (0); maybe. I have had symptoms consistent with the Coronavirus/Covid-19 (dry cough, fever, shortness of breath), but I was not tested (0.5); yes, a medical test confirmed I was infected with the Coronavirus (1).
Mental health: Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems? Little interest or pleasure in doing things; feeling down, depressed, or hopeless; feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge; not being able to stop or control worrying. Response categories: not at all (0), several days (0.33), more than half the days (0.67), almost every day (1).

Vaccine intent: If a vaccine against Coronavirus is developed and testing shows it to be safe and effective, would you get vaccinated? Response categories: no (0), I am not sure (0.5), yes (1).

Mandatory vaccinations: If a vaccine against Coronavirus is developed and testing shows it to be safe and effective, should everyone be required to get vaccinated? Response categories: no (0), I am not sure (0.5), yes (1).

Health vs. economy: As of now, what is more important for the government to do? Response categories: contain the health threat of the Coronavirus (0), manage the economic pain caused by the Coronavirus (1).

Family financial: We are interested in how people are getting along financially these days. Would you say that you (and your family living there) are better off or worse off financially than you were a year ago? Response categories: better off (1), about the same (0.5), worse off (1).

Lost job: Which of the following best describes your current work situation? Unemployed (1), all others (0).

School confidence: If your child’s school offers [children’s schools]/[schools in your community] offer in-person classes at some point this fall, how confident are you that school officials will take appropriate precautions to limit the spread of the Coronavirus? Response categories: not at all confident (0), not too confident (0.33), somewhat confident (0.67), very confident (1).

School mode: In your opinion, what do you think your child’s school [children’s schools]/[schools in your community] should be offering students this fall? Response categories: all online instruction (0), a mix of online and in-person instruction (0.5), all in-person instruction (1)

Gender: Female (1), male (0).

Nonwhite race: nonwhite (1), white (0).

Born-again religion: Would you describe yourself as a born-again or Evangelical Christian? Yes (1), no (0).

College degree: College degree or graduate degree (1); less than four-year degree (0)

Income: Please indicate your yearly household income. Response categories; $10,000 increments up to $100,000, $100–150,000, and $150,000 and above. Rescaled from 0 to 1.

Age: Please select your age. Under 18, 18 – 24, 25 – 34, 35 – 44, 45 – 54, 55 – 64, 65 – 74, 75 – 84, 85 or older. Rescaled from 0 to 1.

Party identification: Standard 7-point measure rescaled from 0 to 1 with 0 Strong Democrat and 1 Strong Republican.

Ideology: Five-point ideology measure; very liberal, liberal, moderate, conservative, very conservative, rescaled from 0 to 1 with conservative high and "haven’t thought much about this as moderate.

Parent: Are you the parent/guardian to any children under 18 living in your home? Yes (1), No (0).
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